

THE ANCHORHOLD:

Sovereignty in Solitary

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To
Mom and Dad, who taught me everything;
Steve, who supports me in everything;
and Teddy and Colin, who are my everything

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The dissertation, in two parts, addresses the unique role of the anchorite in medieval society and the curious imbalance of gender representation in Europe's anchorholds. While over 600 anchorites lived during the Middle Ages, approximately 80% of them were women. This significant inequity must be attributed to more than religion, demographics, or economics. With a focus on two primary sources, this study contends that gendered circumstances added to this feminine preponderance as much as these other elements previously theorized by anchoritic scholars.

The "Letter of Inquiry for Becoming an anchoress," a 1329 church document existing in Shere, Surrey, England, provides insight into the process an individual would have taken to become an anchoress, including the vetting she endured by the bishop or his suffragan. His investigation included the determination that the woman be "not feignedly but in truth" requesting a more saintly life in the anchorhold. This wording exposes the Church's concern that a number of women affected a pious mien in order to gain entrance to the secluded residence.

The *Ancrene Wisse*, or *Guide for anchoresses*, indicates the rules the *mediatrix* must follow once sequestered in the hermitage. The very existence of this document reveals that some women were not ascetically inclined. They had untoward relationships, owned and held property, kept pets and livestock, taught school, gossiped, and enjoyed full social lives and an elevated communal status from within their anchorholds. The critical portion of the dissertation asserts that some used the anchorage as a secular refuge. Although their place in time precludes their being labeled feminists, these women, by extreme means, sought sovereignty in a patriarchal culture and, therefore, can be conceived as proto-feminists.

This theory is the impetus for the creative portion of the dissertation, a historical novel entitled *Squint*. Christiana, a young girl whose limited life choices make the austere anchorhold seem a viable option, petitions the bishop for enclosure and uses her wiles to conceal a secret from her family and friends, her clergy, and the villagers she counsels.

The Anchorhold: Sovereignty in Solitary

“‘My liege lady, generally,’ said he,
‘women desire to have sovereignty.’”
~Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

Introduction

The image of a woman spending her entire life in solitary confinement in a small, stone cell might, today, be the basis for a horror movie. However, during the Middle Ages, anchorites chose this existence and so held a fascinating position in the Roman Catholic Church as well as in their communities. The anchorite lived in a sealed dwelling or chamber attached to a church, with one window, called a squint, for participating in Mass, another for contact with the attendant(s) or servant(s), and, sometimes, an additional one for communication with the public. Anchoritic text translator Robert Hasenfratz explains that this strictly solitary lifestyle was one of the early forms of Christian monasticism, modeled after the “desert saints like St. Anthony who, around 285 A.D., wandered into the Egyptian desert searching for God through complete solitude” (2). Like other monastics, most anchorites withdrew from society to devote the rest of their lives to prayer and contemplation. Despite a larger percentage of male monastics in general, a great majority of medieval anchorites were women.

Although protocol differed by region and even by diocese, an individual seeking to sequester herself in the anchorhold followed a general procedure. First, according to the “Letter of Inquiry for Becoming an anchoress,” she had to petition her bishop. This letter, a 1329 church document existing in Shere, Surrey, England, provides insight into the process an individual would have taken to become an anchoress. The bishop would send an intermediary to interview the woman, her family, and her neighbors. If she were found to desire the post “not feignedly” and if she were free and “not espoused or joined to marriage,” the bishop would likely consent to confine her.



Figure 1
“The Way of the anchoress”

The bishop, who was subsequently responsible for the anchoress as her confessor, might give Last Rites or say the Office of the Dead in the enclosure ceremony, signifying the woman’s death to the world and her rebirth into a spiritual life (Figure 1). Then she would be confined in her chamber. A local mason would often fortify her cell or it would be locked from outside. Officially, then, she was “dead” to this world.

Ancrene Wisse and Daily Life

A thirteenth century text known as the *Ancrene Wisse* (*A Guide for Anchoresses*) was originally penned as a book of rules for three women—possibly sisters—enclosed together, and it established a daily routine for those leading this austere, eremitic life. The male author, possibly an Augustinian, Cistercian, or Dominican friar, recommended approximately four hours of solitary prayer a day (Hasenfratz 1).

Through the squint, the anchoress would then listen to church services and perhaps take the Eucharist. If literate, she might read religious texts, including the Bible, her psalter, or the *Ancrene Wisse* itself. Next, she could sew or weave or do some other form of work on the church's behalf. Although most anchoresses had benefactors, Hasenfratz's translation of the *Ancrene Wisse* implies that they sometimes performed certain tasks to support themselves (8.153-154). For example it says, "Help yourself with your own labor as far as ever you can to clothe and feed yourselves [and those who serve you], if there is need" (8.153-154). Finally, some anchoresses would meet with and counsel their citizens through an outward window, periodically hidden from the public behind curtains or shutters. If an anchoress had no outward window, which was sometimes the case, then inward reflection, rapture, reading, and writing consumed the rest of her existence.

Gender Imbalance

Scholars agree that more than six hundred anchoresses lived in Europe in the eleventh through sixteenth centuries. Historian Patricia J. F. Rosof estimates between sixty-nine and eighty-two percent of anchorites were women (125). Theories exist, but no one can fully explain this gender imbalance. Rosof offers the common conjecture that “a confluence of economic, demographic, and religious circumstances worked to bring about a preponderance of female over male recluses” (123). It is true that, economically, a growing European middle class began to assert its independence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This independence manifested in individuals governing their own fate in a society which, to this point, predetermined most people’s roles. Indeed, more women became property and business owners and nuns during feudalism’s unraveling. But women did not own 80% of the property or businesses nor did they comprise 80% of the monastic roles during this time. Anchoritic scholars have failed to explain why economic changes produced such a lopsided gender imbalance in the anchorhold during this era of increased autonomy.

Some anchoritic scholars loosely conjecture that demographics contributed to the disproportion of female anchorites. Demographically, however, the European population skewed in favor of men in Europe during the medieval period (Herlihy 11-12). This created an implicit *masculine* gender imbalance in any function that a male or female might perform. Furthermore, discounting those who died before the age of five, the mean life expectancy for women was 43.6 years; for men, it was 48.7 years (Woodbury). Death in childbirth, which, theoretically, no anchorite need fear, seems to be the main factor

contributing to this lopsided social statistic. Even if we make longevity the same between the sexes by removing the childbirth factor, simple demographics do not support the reasoning for the grossly uneven distribution of females in the anchorhold.

Rosof and other anchoritic scholars postulate correctly that religious circumstances helped increase the number of women seeking a solitary life in the anchorage. Religiously, the most rapidly-growing orders allowed only male houses in their monasteries throughout the era. This would mean fewer spiritual “homes” for women. Certainly, piety remains the primary reason for the gender disparity in the anchorholds throughout Europe. However, I contend that gender circumstances added to this multitude of females choosing the anchoritic life at least as much as the confluence of economics, demographics, or religion. Most women, even those of privileged status, had little control over their own lives (Bovey). Women’s resistance to male-dominated traditions of both the era in general and the Church specifically led to an abundance of females petitioning for refuge in the anchorhold. While the profusion of female urban recluses does not itself constitute a feminist movement, it certainly shows that some were willing to break the male-controlled philosophy of the time period which, dictated by biblical texts, purported that women were inferior to men (Bovey).

To be sure, life in the anchorhold was not an easy one. In fact, the self-contained and stark conditions might thwart the most religiously committed individuals, even in a medieval culture known for its asceticism. However, according to Rosof, female recluses seemed to be “strong, highly motivated women” and “became anchoresses in spite of great pressure to follow other directions” (125). Of course, most chose this solitary confinement because they were deeply devoted to God. I oppose the general assumption,

though, that women populated the cell for solely religious reasons. I postulate that the anchorhold could have appealed to willful women of this harsh era because they had limited life choices, wanted to establish individual identities, and hoped to escape negative aspects of their existence, such as the hardships of marriage and dangers of childbirth. In effect, anchoresses were proto-feminists, empowering themselves spiritually, yes; but also untethering themselves from domestic affairs, pursuing the deepest realms of themselves as human beings, and asserting a control over their lives that few women of the medieval period could conceive.

Religious Choices

If women in the Middle Ages were fortunate enough to have a choice in their futures and were considering a religious lifestyle, they had only five general options, according to Dr. Ann K. Warren, author of *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. They could choose to become nuns (with the subsequent potential to become a prioress or abbess), beguines, tertiaries, hermits, or anchoresses. In many ways, the anchoress role was superior to the other choices.

First, consider the nun, whose position might offer refuge to a medieval woman, but could also pose other problems for her. Warren reminds us that “consignment to the convent [was] the fate of many upper-class women of the High and Late Middle Ages,” and they took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. “The shelter of a medieval nunnery was available” (1) but only to those whose families had the means to endow them. Most did not have the means, and so made other choices. One of those alternatives,

becoming an anchoress, was not limited to only the upper classes. No dowry need be paid for her to be enclosed. The bishop was responsible as her sponsor, but she could offset the Church's minor expenses by doing some labor within the anchorhold.

Another drawback of being a nun was that a male Order ruled the convent connected to it, providing women little autonomy in their religious pursuits. Furthermore, the convent was sometimes governed by an arrogant abbotess or power-hungry prioress. A willful medieval woman might balk at having her piety so regulated. Another drawback of the nunnery was the necessity of living in a social setting; for an individual with a solitary mien, this was a curse. Nuns had to cope with social strife that living in close quarters often produces. A woman who chose to enter a nunnery instead of an unwanted marriage might find different, but no less noisome, aspects lurked there. A headstrong, intelligent woman might eliminate the convent as a possible choice for these reasons. If, as Rosof says, "[t]he factors which influenced religious women to choose the life of a recluse over that of a nun varied with individual circumstances" (126), it is arguable that a percentage of the anchoresses selected the cell based on individual circumstances unrelated to religion.

Finally, a woman seeking refuge for religious or other reasons might choose the anchorhold because, although many within the Church and the community considered the anchoress a bride of Christ and a secular angel, she did not take vows. According to Church documents, including the original "Letter of Inquiry for Becoming an anchoress," confession, fasting, and vigil were all part of the ceremony of enclosure; vows, surprisingly, were not. The state of one's soul constantly dominated the medieval collective conscience, and taking vows feignedly would certainly put one's spirit in

jeopardy. Because the anchoress did not take a vow, the role might lure someone less religiously-inclined.

Other female religious choices during the era included the beguine and the tertiary. Like the nun, both took vows. Unlike the nun, both could maintain their secular lives and occupations while serving the destitute in their parishes in the name of God. A beguine was not bound to an Order and “she might live at home or with a group who shared her values” (A. Warren 1) which consisted of supporting herself honestly and helping the needy in her urban community. Tertiaries were laypeople, linked to a mendicant Order under a vow of poverty, who also provided health care services and aid to the sick and the needy. However, neither of these alternatives allowed for escape from matrimonial, domestic, or familial obligations. The anchorhold did.

Hermitesses did not take vows, but they did escape—into European forests, hills, and marshes. Most sought the reclusive life to foster a more personal and mystical relationship with God than the nuns, beguines, and tertiaries might be permitted. However, the hermit survived in the wilderness in uncomfortable, unsafe living conditions. Unprotected both physically and religiously (because they were not governed or aided by an Order), theirs was not an easy existence (A. Warren 1). An individual considering the reclusive lifestyle would weigh her options between the hermit and the anchoress. Both were isolated, but more comfort and protection existed in the anchorhold. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* states “It is quite unreasonable to come into an anchorhouse...in order to look for ease there” (Hasenfratz 88) which suggests that some “unreasonable” woman had done so in the past. A relatively comfortable, enclosed

cell and a staff of one or more maidservants might logically appeal more than living in the wild marshes or in caves or trees in the forests.

Sovereignty in Solitary

Clearly, the anchoress role was one that might attract an independent-minded religious woman. It also might attract the more secular woman searching for an alternative to an arranged marriage or overbearing parents. Also, Dr. Warren points out “to be a bride of Christ was for many women not a denial of the ‘natural’ desire to marry and bear children, but rather the route to a life more independent and intellectually creative than in the marriage of the day” (1). A woman would not necessarily have to be a “bride of Christ” in order to attain that elusive independence if she chose the anchoritic life. Imagine if one of these strong women was faced with a betrothal to a man who repulsed or scared her. Might not life in an anchorhouse, alone, be more appealing than such a marriage? In her book *Radical Wisdom*, the feminist writer Beverly J. Lanzetta states that male-dominated cultures produce a desire for women to seek ways to break the bonds of inferiority (3). Medieval Europe was such a culture, and an anchoress was a woman who could flex her independent muscles by choosing solitary confinement in an anchorhold over a life under the thumb of an intolerable, domineering husband.

The position of anchoress had other advantages. Symbolically, the anchoress, or urban recluse, lived at the crossroads—often literally, in the church in the center of the village or town, and, always, spiritually, between Heaven and earth. The leading researcher and translator of the *Vitas*, or Lives, of these anchoresses, Anneke Mulder-

Bakker, suggests that one venerable aspect of the role is that this crossroad position offered an accessible path to divine knowledge. The *litterati*, or men of letters, held that “schooling and booklearning . . . were a prerequisite for an ecclesiastical function” (*Lives* 38). The Word of God was “recorded in Latin and transmitted in schools” while *sapientia*, or spiritual wisdom, was God-given (*Lives* 40). No amount of book study could produce this kind of knowledge, and, thus, many people considered it superior. During the twelfth century, “the mystically inspired . . . became entangled in a competitive struggle with early scholasticism” (*Lives* 40). In fact, this schism in Roman Catholicism in some ways pitted laypeople against the scholarly clerics who were just beginning to inflate their role in people’s access to the Divine. Because an anchoress had the reputation of possessing this venerable *sapientia*, the community was drawn to her and respected her. Visions and prophecies established and maintained the authority of the woman and her message. This cache within the community certainly might prompt an ambitious woman to consider taking on this role.

As a woman often more approachable than a priest and who enjoyed the protection of the bishop but had no official ecclesiastical function, the anchoress became a popular figure. She was called *mediatrix*, or mediator, between God and man (*Lives* 73). Laypeople saw the anchoress as one who had direct interaction with God; with her, though, they did not have to scale an intellectual wall. Parishioners went to her window seeking direction and devotions. According to the *Ancrene Wisse*, the anchoress “holds up the entire parish with her prayers” (Hasenfratz 3), and for this, they revered her. They honored her for her austere choice and her candid contact with the Lord. Furthermore, the personal relationship with God and her status in the community appealed to the

spirited medieval woman. In the capacity of anchoress, she would not have to rely on a priest's defining her connection with the Divine *or* society's defining her bond with other people. She could establish her own mystical relationship with Him *and* her own "guidance counselor" relationship with her citizens. Just as women do today, a medieval woman likely wanted some control over her own connection to the Infinite and, ultimately, her own life, and the anchorhouse offered this. This promise of sovereignty attracted women to the anchorhold in great numbers in England, the Low Countries, and, to a lesser extent, other parts of Europe.

Another draw of this seemingly strange life choice was that an anchoress could, if she so desired, establish herself as a leader in a society which did not allow that role for many women. Stepping into the anchorhold instantly elevated her status and gave her a modicum of power. Of course these factors might not be considerations for purely religious women, but certainly, they would be considerations for a lay person with different aspirations for her life than the era could offer. In Hasenfratz's translation, the *Ancrene Wisse* advises against being an anchoress who desires "more mastery and ladyship than she could readily have had in the world" (88) and one who "wants to be recognized and known at once for her talk among the wise" (72). This suggests that some urban recluses opted for the anchorhold to gain status.

Anne Savage, a scholar leader in the translation of the Anchoritic texts—including the *Ancrene Wisse*, *Holy Maidenhood*, *Soul's Keeping*, *The Wooing of Our Lord*, and the Wooing group prayers—argues that converting these texts poses a particular challenge because modern readers reject the possibility that the male writer might have respected the anchoresses for whom he writes the rules. Perhaps present-day

readers are influenced by their knowledge of the era's proclivity for emphasizing men's authority over women (Bovary). A certain amount of "cultural baggage" results from the accepted male-dominated principles of the thirteenth century. She also suggests that it is difficult for a contemporary audience to fathom the very solitary choice, so translation is tricky. "Our own [modern] alternatives" to the constraints on women in the Middle Ages "make it difficult to see the anchoritic [life]...as freedom" (Savage 190). Savage does acknowledge the irony that freedom exists within the cell's walls.

She makes some excellent points regarding the *religious* freedom an anchoress has in the anchorhold. For instance, the anchoress is "in charge of what happens in the dramatic meditations, wooings, and their after-effects in her continued solitude. Her male confessor does not have the authority to take this freedom from her" (Savage 192). Furthermore, she states, "The relative freedom of virginity. . . is *per se* attractive; and if that is not enough, which it certainly would be for some, *Holy Maidenhood* is lavish in its descriptions of the future joys virginity could bring" (Savage 188). She goes so far as to say the anchoress "has made a dramatic and public renunciation of the world by her enclosure. In some ways the anchoritic life in the cell...represents an inviolate femininity heroically maintained" (Savage 189). However, the "cultural baggage" that Savage laments has itself stopped Savage and other anchoritic scholars short of postulating that some medieval women would choose the reclusive life for a variety of reasons unrelated to religion. Savage's analysis of the anchoritic texts fails to account for the possibility that women might have entered the hold for pragmatic rather than holy reasons—that she might have entered the anchorhold to assert her independence.

Another point to consider is that Savage's attention was on the *Vitas*—those texts which were written by hagiographers, commissioned in an attempt to gain sainthood for their subjects. The tone of the texts she translated was one of veneration for the most religious of the women enclosed in Europe. Because these texts idealized their stories, we must consider that not all anchoresses, and indeed not even the women most revered for their spiritual roles, lived the lives of those recorded in the *Vitas*. Scholars know that hagiographers took liberties with their subjects, and any careful reader understands that they are not true histories. If over six hundred medieval women resided in the anchorhouse, our logical understanding of humans dictates that a few of them were “saints,” and a few of them were “sinners.”

Savage assumes that all the women who chose the anchorhold did so purely to direct their own spiritual lives. Conversely, by looking at her arguments in the context of women entering the anchorhold for *non*-religious reasons, one sees that other factors could have influenced their choices. Consider Savage's statement, “Whatever the anchoress does escape in the form of marriage and all its woes, she certainly never escapes the carnal suffering of her femininity. In the privacy of her cell, though, she has the opportunity to translate that suffering into a different locus, to identify it as Christ's suffering” (Savage 189). Indeed, the anchoress did escape marriage and all its woes—sexual acquiescence, the dangers of childbearing, the anguish of childrearing—by entering the hermitage. She also had ultimate privacy in her cell. Once inside, she could direct her days any way she saw fit, despite the rules set forth in the *Ancrene Wisse* or by any other Church authority. A majority of anchoresses were enclosed alone. No other human being would ever know how she actually spent her days.

The Rules

The *Ancrene Wisse* was meant as a “rule book” of sorts, and rules are made when an authority perceives unjust, immoral, or corrupt behavior. The very existence of an *Ancrene Wisse* implies that some anchoresses were using their anchorholds in “inappropriate” ways. Savage and Watson’s translation includes a passage stating, “Some wretched anchoress has gone into the hole of the anchorhouse to befoul the place, and to practice the filths of the flesh there more secretly than she could if she were in the world. For who has a better chance to do her wickedness than the false anchoress?” (96-97). The author of the text warns that “under the appearance of good sin often lies” (74) and compares false anchoresses to foxes. “Like the fox, they have an innocent look some of the time, and yet they are full of guile. They pretend to be other than they are... They expect to beguile God, as they fool simple men—and they beguile themselves most” (96). According to the most definitive text on anchorism, false anchoresses existed. Clearly, women did choose this life for reasons other than economics, demographics, or religion.

The decrees in the *Ancrene Wisse* were not arbitrary; each directive indicates that some anchoress, somewhere, was found to be committing the offense, and future anchoresses must be warned to avoid the same transgression. Certainly, some urban recluses did not spend their days in supplication and prayer. For example, an entire portion of Part XIII “The Outward Rule” concerns itself with social food and drink. The text says “*Sum ancre maketh hire bord with hire gest ute-with. Thet is to mucche freondschipe, for of alle ordres thenne is hit uncundelukest, ant meast ayein ancre ordre, the is al dead to the world. Me haveth i-herd ofte thet deade speken with cwiike - ah thet*

ha eten with cwike ne fond ich yet neaver” (8.30-33). Hasenfratz translates this passage as “Some anchoress...will sit to dinner outside with her guest. That is too much friendship for in all orders then it is unnatural and is most contrary to the order of the anchoress who is completely dead to the world” (75). It seems that some anchoresses, despite the author’s warning that “[t]here should be a great difference between an anchoress and the lady of the house” (Savage and Watson 74), were dining with guests such as family, friends, or clerics. Also, notice that the anchorhold was somehow breached, in some cases with a door to a courtyard or “parlor” (Hasenfratz 4) that would be locked from the outside and presided over by the servant who could “admit or refuse visitors” (Hasenfratz 185). A modern feminist enjoys a dinner out with friends periodically, but an anchoress was not supposed to partake in this communal endeavor. Obviously, some did or the monk who penned the missive would not have made mention of it. Enclosure ironically afforded social freedom to women. The promise of this autonomy might entice one clever enough to recognize the irony.

Another portion of Hasenfratz’s translation of Part XIII focuses on a solitary’s possessions. “Anchoresses should be careful about receiving items from men” (8.71-75), and she “is not to send, receive, or write letters” (8.166). These pronouncements mean that some women were not completely focused on religious pursuits. Perhaps most astonishing in this section is the decree that she “should keep only a cat, not livestock or goods to sell” (8.76-88). In our modern society, the “crazy cat lady” is a stereotype of a solitary woman who eschews human companionship for the less demanding company of animals. Rarely would a woman of the Middle Ages be able to do the same, but an anchoress could (Figure 2). It also says she must not “store anything for safekeeping”

(8.89-90). This rule implies that an anchoress might improperly act as a bank vault or worse. Evidently, anchoresses were receiving gifts from men, corresponding with the outside world, keeping livestock and others' valuables, and selling merchandise.

Anchoresses might enter the cell under religious pretenses, but the existence of the *Ancrene Wisse* proves that some women were carrying on a very social and independent lifestyle subversively from within the anchorhold.



Figure 2
“Anchoress and Cat”

With respect to the anchoress's role in her community, the *Ancrene Wisse* has specific orders. The Hasenfratz text states that her window “should never become a source of news or gossip” (2.486-488). It instructed the women not to gossip or listen to gossip, being careful how the outside world might unhinge her focus on her religious inside world. This anti-gossip theme is repeated in a number of places in the text. “Shut ...your ear...against idle speech; let no tale or tidings of the world come to you” (Savage

and Watson 75). Often, the author suggests the anchoresses follow Mother Mary's lead in remaining silent. According to the Savage and Watson translation, in "Part II: The Outer Senses," the author states, "[A]n anchoress, whatever she is, however much she knows, should keep quiet" (73) and compares those non-compliant to the common image of the frivolously cackling hen. Hasenfratz's translation of the passage continues thus:

"Therefore, an anchoress...[should] not have a hen's nature. The hen, when she has laid, can [do nothing] but cackle, but what does she profit from that?" (2.220-222). Of course, this indicates that some anchoresses were gossips and used their window as a social outlet. A woman truly devoted to God would not need to be reminded to avoid the transgression of rumormongering.

Another prohibition was "an anchoress must not degenerate into a school-teacher or turn an anchor-house into a children's school" (Hasenfratz 8.162-165). Even if the anchoress proffered religious instruction, this decree supports the assertion that some women used their cells in ways unintended by most anchoritic standards. A crafty woman would certainly recognize that the building's walls and the community's gratitude could protect her while she pursued a career as an educator.

The *Ancrene Wisse* attempts to hinder scandalous aspects of the anchoresses' relationships. First, Savage and Watson translate a section of Part II as, "Let no one trust the anchoress who lets in a man's eye and shows herself" (71) and cautions these women to "hold your hands within your windows. Handling or any other touch between a man and an anchoress is a thing so ugly and a deed so shameful and so naked a sin, to all the word so hateful and so great a scandal, that there is no need to speak or write against it" (91) although he does so at great length. Hasenfratz's translation states that she should

not “allow any man to sleep in [her] apartments” (8.89-95). Next, Savage and Watson translate the author’s words, saying, “An anchoress has sometimes built between herself and her priest either a treacherous love or a great war” (75) and this, too, is to be avoided. Apparently, some female recluses were not, in fact, solitary at all; rather, they were carrying on love affairs.

Some anchorholds were recorded to hold two or more women, and the text points out that “some have been tempted by their own sisters” (Hasenfratz 71). Again, the words suggest that some women were manipulating their solitary confinement for their own sovereign purposes. Michelle M. Sauer, winner of the 2005-6 LGBT Religious History Award and writer for Thirdspace, posits an interesting lesbian theory about the anchorhold: “Both the regulations for and the structure of the anchoritic cell could provide the necessary space and conditions to create a ‘lesbian void,’ in which the anchoress could explore woman-woman erotic possibilities” (1). The medieval culture allowed for few female realms or private spaces where erotic relationships might develop, particularly for the middle or peasant classes. The anchoress’s chamber certainly was a private, female domain, and it was an option for all social classes. Sauer, too, refers to the *Ancrene Wisse*, particularly Part II, which details the danger of “peeping” to support her claim. “Take note now what harm has come of peeping: not one harm or two, but all the woe that now is and ever was and ever will be—all comes from sight” (Savage and Watson 71). She discusses the architecture of the anchorhold. It allows for a window into her maid’s chamber, “which has interesting ramifications for this discussion. Predominately [sic], it seems to facilitate woman-woman eroticism, in

that it grants the possibility of a lesbian gaze” (Sauer 1). This intimates that a woman in her anchorhold might develop erotic feelings for her maidservants.

One aspect of the *Ancrene Wisse* that Sauer ignores is a passage regarding the anchoress’s interaction with her maids. The original wording is “The ancre ne hire meiden ne plohien nane worldliche gomenes ed te thurle, *ne ne ticki togederes* [emphasis mine], for ase seith Seint Beornard, unwurthe euch gastelich mon, ant nomeliche to ancre, euch swuch fleschlich frovre, ant hit binimeth gastelich thet is withute met utnume murhthe - ant thet is uvel.” (8.272-276). Hasenfratz’s translation is “Let neither the anchoress or her maiden play any worldly games at the window, nor tussle together, for as St. Bernard says, every such bodily comfort is an unworthy thing for each spiritual person, and especially for an anchoress, and it takes away the spiritual which is beyond measure the supreme happiness—and that is a bad exchange” (87). If “tussling” is translated as a physical wrestling, this excerpt paints a curious picture of the relationship between the anchoress and her maidens. Let me go farther than Sauer to suggest that the anchorhold might be a space for a medieval lesbian, perhaps the only place, to privately be her true self, which would be suspect in such a strict culture (Murry 200). We know that in some instances more than one woman was enclosed in a single anchorhold. While no evidence exists to support the theory that women might enter an anchorhouse feignedly in order to have this sexual freedom, one does not have to take a great leap to conceive of a situation in which two lesbian women would request to be enclosed in a cell together, under the auspices of religiosity.

A common theme throughout *Ancrene Wisse* is the urgent need to avoid opportunities for scandal. Savage and Watson show several places where this subject is

broached. In Part II, the monk encourages propriety through use of a witness to counsel or confession “[f]irst so that the envious cannot lie about [the anchoress] without the witness proving them false; second, is to set others an example and to deprive the wicked anchoress of wretched deceit” (97-98). To further show the fear of scandal, the writer uses bird metaphors. “True anchoresses are called birds because they leave the earth—that is, the love of all worldly things—and, through yearning in their hearts for heavenly things, fly upward toward heaven” (97). However, “[t]he ostrich[es]...try to look as if they are flying but their feet are constantly dragged to earth. It is just the same with the fleshy anchoress, who lives in fleshly desires and follows her ease...whoever looks carefully will laugh her to scorn” (98). The author’s preoccupation with the sinful *mediatrix* demonstrates that some were not pious.

Immoral anchoresses must have existed, or the monk who wrote the rules would not have spent such time delineating their iniquitous behavior. Part IV of the guide for anchoresses concerns itself with temptations listing each one as a cub of the lion of pride, and the gestures of pride could lead to scandal. The proper anchoress must abjure “[c]arrying the head high, posturing with the neck, giving sidelong looks, looking scornful, winking with the eye, pouting with the mouth, making taunting signs with the hand or head, crossing one’s legs, looking lovingly at men, talking like an innocent, and lisping on purpose” (121). Similarly, the author explicitly warns against “too much pride in adornment, or in the coloring, or in the pleating of the veil, the headdress, or any other clothing; wearing belts like a young girl; plastering yourself with cosmetic ointments; foul flirting; coloring your hair, painting your face, plucking your eyebrows or shaping them upward with wet fingers” (121). Part VIII underscores this by stating “I do not at

all want you to be regarded a courtly anchoress—but everywhere and always be careful that nobody leaves you scandalized by your lack of discipline” (201). The actions of a sloppy, fleshly *mediatrix* might allow others to defame her. The prevalence of this concern throughout the text tells the reader that some anchoresses had been vilified for their perceived or actual immorality. The author spends an inordinate amount of time worrying about the disreputable activities of the anchoress whose sole concern was supposedly her relationship with God. Some of these women were evidently not focused on the piety of their occupation. Therefore, some must have entered the anchorhold feignedly.

Secular Angel and Proto-Feminist

Considered a secular angel, the urban recluse held a venerable position in the community, gaining a positive reputation for giving wise advice and praying for those in the parish. Juliana of Norwich, perhaps the most famous anchorite, wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love* in the mid-1300's. This sacred text is renowned for its recounting of her prophetic visions, and the Church still quotes it today: “All will be well and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (Juliana). In fact, Juliana of Norwich is considered the first woman to write a book, proving that, indeed, the female anchorite could speak and act in influential ways. Rather than being cited for heresy, Juliana of Norwich enjoyed accolades for her ideas. This was rarely the case for women during the Middle Ages. Therefore, it is logical to label Juliana of Norwich, with her prominent

writing and effective leadership within the Church, as a proto-feminist, one who precedes but lays foundation for the feminist movement.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leading figure early in the women's movement, said in a speech to the U.S. Senate in 1892, "In discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny... on a solitary island. Her rights under such circumstances are to use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness." While the medieval culture would not condone such individualism—even for most of its male citizens—people during that period, and indeed all oppressed humans throughout history, certainly agreed with the sentiment promulgated by Ms. Stanton's words. With no platform from which to endorse or disseminate this sentiment, however, medieval women stole for themselves what little they could of happiness, comfort, and safety, in whatever ways were presented to them.

Stanton goes further by asserting "[T]he isolation of every human soul and the necessity of self-dependence must give each individual the right to choose his own surroundings." If a medieval woman stumbled upon a way to facilitate her own well-being, she might just seize it. The anchorhold provided this spiritual loophole. A female who conspires or fights to make her own choices may never know how her words or actions will affect others. The difference between the proto-feminist and the feminist is only the time period in which her endorsements or actions take place. Therefore, although labeling a woman from the medieval era as a feminist would be anachronistic, those dissident anchoresses, who feigned or inflated their piety to gain entry into the anchorhold for their own safety and happiness, endeavored to choose their own destiny in that patriarchal period and have thus earned the proto-feminist label.

The medievalist and feminist Elizabeth Robertson suggested, in a speech given to the 27th International Congress on Medieval Studies, we must acknowledge how our present concerns shape our attempt “to produce an objective understanding of the past.” Furthermore, she said feminists cannot use “the past as a mirror but as a strategic tool for understanding the present in relationship to a different past.” In accordance with her cautionary discourse, one must avoid anachronistically labeling an anchoress a feminist.

The very limited lifestyle choices available to medieval women would have some groping for options, and the anchorhouse was certainly an interesting alternative. At first, the anchorhold might seem a desperate measure—solitary confinement for the rest of one’s life. On further examination, however, the scholar acknowledges the appeal of this not-so-reclusive role. Intelligent women would have realized that it was a protected, private, and paradoxical space. She could “hide in plain sight” if she were careful and clever. She would have had to stay a step ahead of the bishop by convincing him that she “desired the post not feignedly” as the “Letter of Inquiry” states, but once enclosed, she could direct her daily life. The role of the anchoress was interpreted differently in different regions and parishes. If her bishop or priest had read *Ancrene Wisse*, which was unlikely since books were rare, she might need to restrain her actions. Because this post was held by the peasant, the merchant class, and the upper class alike, it was a viable option for the proto-feminist.

Conclusion

While some scholars such as Savage and Rosof have suggested that the anchorhold ironically held a certain amount of freedom, none have yet proposed that the anchorhold offered an unorthodox substitute to the medieval female's virtually choiceless reality. Their confinement ultimately led to liberation. Admittedly, the majority of anchoresses experienced this freedom in their spiritual lives. Despite being born into a patriarchal society, some clever women undoubtedly sought ways to govern themselves and did so in the anchorholds in the middle of their villages. Indeed, they did so while the community revered them for their role. These cunning women can be considered among the earliest, albeit unwitting, proto-feminists, constructing a life for themselves in the male-dominated culture of the Middle Ages, crusading not for all women's rights, but for the right to choose in their own individual lives, unknowingly laying the foundation for others of their gender to build upon in the coming centuries. It is no wonder that a majority of European anchorites were women when one imagines the anchorhold as an appealing alternative rather than the setting of a modern horror film.

Squint
by Kimberly Flynn

Prologue

Lying still as death on the dirt floor, the girl heard the cleric's monotone voice giving her last rites. "And thus do I commend thee into the arms of our Lord, Jesus Christ, preserver of all mercy and reality, and the Father creator. We give him glory as we give you into his arms in everlasting peace to be prepared to return into the denser reality of God the father, creator of all. Amen, Amen, Amen."

She listened to her friends' keening, felt a flutter in her gut. Then the mason chunked the final stone into its place and all was black. She was officially an anchoress—dead to the world outside her tiny enclosure attached to the church. She welcomed relief's displacement of fear. In a moment, her sight adjusted to the darkness, and she smiled at her triumph. She and her secret were safe.

Chapter 1

Evrard folded his little sister's hands in his own.

"Pray with me, Christiana," he said quietly. Playing priest was her brother's favorite pastime, and she loved him, so the girl dutifully bowed her head over their clasped hands. As Evrard began his prayers, she peeked between strands of her flaxen hair and looked past her brother's stern brow. Her eyes lit upon the book. She squinted at it and schemed.

Someone, her father perhaps, had put it high on the shelf, like they always did with the soul cakes they were trying to keep from her, even though everyone knew the more cakes eaten, the more souls were saved from purgatory. Her mind itched for want of that psalter. She longed to read but could not because she was a girl, and she yearned for something of her own, but poverty prevented it. This was the first book that had ever been in their home, and she wanted it in her hands.

She kept her head still, but shifted her gaze to Evrard as he prayed—for their father's safe travels, for their mother's health, and for old Hildegarde, their anchoress entombed in her cell at Sint Sebastian's church only three hundred steps from their apartment. He asked God for His blessings for Christiana, for himself, and for the parishioners here in Frahan and those in Rochehaut. By the time Evrard said, "Amen," Christiana had a plan.

The moonlight was over-bright streaming through the unshuttered window above their sleeping pallet. One beam trained upon the psalter there on its high shelf, as if Someone wanted to draw her attention to it. She stared at it, its thick vellum pages, unsewn and uneven, as she waited for the shallow, smooth breathing that confirmed her mother and brother slept. Evrard's inhalations and exhalations had gone immediately to a peaceful place, but her mother's had only a moment before shifted, as if some inner tantrum was finally settled. In her ten years, Christiana had known her mother to suffer like this twice before. She had been too young to understand then, but now she was aware. A babe grew in her mother's womb. This filled her with both awe and dread. She pushed these thoughts away hastily.

She resisted sleep's insistent pull. Rising soundlessly, she padded across the wooden floor, avoiding the crankiest boards. She lifted a small bench from beside the table, careful not to grunt under its weight. Slowly, slowly, she inched it toward the shelf on the wall beside the door. She'd travelled several feet when she succumbed to its heft, and for a bit she sat on it, catching her breath and watching her mother's middle rise and fall evenly, wondering what the baby looked like under there and how it'd get out in February.

She resumed her travels, placed the bench under the shelf near the door, and climbed up. Her mother was right. She was getting taller. Able to reach the psalter with ease, she gently lifted it from its resting place and brought it down onto her thighs, surprised at once by its weight and softness. She snuck a glance at her brother, sleeping soundly. She would have to trust her mother was still asleep because she was now obscured by the curtain that separated her parents' bed from theirs.

She ran her little fingers up and down the doughy edges of the pages and used both hands to open the psalter. She shifted her legs to the left to expose the vellum to more of the light streaming in through the window. Her mouth fell open, and she pet the page as she often did Elsa's kitten. Her eyes traced the ink marks, which meant nothing to her. She suspected the writing was Latin. Even if it had been French, she would only have known a few words. But the moonbeam-washed pictures stole her breath.

Christiana watched a small boy climbing a thick, green vine up the left border. On another page, a maiden dropped her handkerchief to a knight waiting, face upturned, below her castle window, which also doubled as the illuminated letter P that began the sentence. On a third leaf, she saw an angry mob chasing the Devil across the bottom and she had to stifle a snort. Christiana wondered if these pictures helped to tell the words' story. Probably not. The psalter would contain Bible verses or psalms to be sung in church, not stories for children. She'd heard her father telling her mother how he'd come to possess the psalter. It seemed an abbey in France had met a fiery end; her father had helped to douse the flames, and found this volume amid the rubble. No one would miss it, he'd said, and it might be wise for Evrard to learn to read it. She lifted the page to her nose, but could detect no smell of ash.

Christiana suddenly became aware of Evrard's eyes, open and possibly upon her, although he was in the shadow so she couldn't be sure. She froze, and a warning heat travelled up her spine. If Evrard told, which he was known sometimes to do, whatever punishment her mother and father could dole out would not extinguish the joy she'd experienced perusing just these three pages. She unconsciously pulled the text towards

her midsection. Evrard's eyes drifted shut. A momentary lapse in sleep, not to be remembered in the morning, she hoped.

With caged breath, she waited for another minute and then retraced her movements. Placing the book back on the shelf, she was careful to arrange it exactly as it had been. She moved the bench haltingly to its station beside the table, then crept into bed beside her brother. Snuggled under the comfortable goose down coverlet her father had brought home to atone for the length of his last trip, she finally allowed herself to relax. The illuminations eddied as sleep tugged her down.

Chapter 2

With her father on a trek to southwest France, ostensibly to trade, the girl began to placidly coax her mother into letting her look at the psalter.

Her mother, fully aware of the ruse, went right along with it, deliberately acquiescing a bit each day. Sunday after church, she allowed her daughter a look at the psalm that the haughty priest had used in that day's sermon. Tuesday morning, Christiana offered to hang wet clothes on the washing line in exchange for a glimpse at the pictures accompanying the first prayer. By rushlight Thursday evening, Christiana scrutinized the psalter for hours, rarely saying anything, to her mother's covert delight. Mary could have coerced Christiana to do just about anything by promising she could hold the psalter in her lap.

While both mother and daughter were quite mindful of this mutual manipulation, it satisfied both parties. Evrard, who could lay hands on a psalter any time he wished at the abbey, looked on, amused. All three understood, without need for articulation, that when Arend van Frahan returned from France, the drama would come to an abrupt halt.

Chapter 3

The snow had started the day after Christmas, and it hadn't stopped for more than a few hours during the next two weeks. The villagers cleared pathways everywhere, and although it was cold, it wasn't bitter, and the children were out throwing snowballs at one another. Christiana did not relish winter, and so she made her way up the rising road to Elsa's warm chamber attached to the anchorhold built into the north-facing wall of the church. Pepper, the grey-striped kitten, welcomed Christiana with a stretch. There was no sign of her friend which meant she was probably out at the Tanners' barn gathering eggs for Hildegard's midday meal. Christiana pressed her ear to the stone listening for evidence that the *mediatrix* was in the anchorhold. Well, that was silly. Of course she was *in* there, but what was she *doing*? This question was always on Christiana's mind when she was visiting. And sometimes when she was not.

Christiana sat by the fire in the servant's chamber, scratching Pepper's upturned chin and awaiting her friend's return. Elsa's low whistle signaled her approach, and Christiana stood, toppling the cat, who gave her the evil eye before settling himself back on the hearth. The girl crossed the small room in four long strides and hid in the nook

situated behind the wooden door. She focused on the opposite wall, the one that separated Hildegard's space from her maid's, as if her attention would allow her to see through the barrier. The round, austere river rocks were both welcoming and formidable, somehow, like a hurried hug.

When her friend entered, rosy-cheeked and smiling, she immediately peeked around into Christiana's nook.

"I could see your footprints in the snow, fool!" Elsa laughed, unfazed. "They entered, but didn't leave, so I knew you were here. That's why I whistled." It was a good thing, too, because Christiana saw she'd guessed correctly, and Elsa's bucket was filled with eggs. If she'd been startled and dropped them? Well.

Elsa cracked one egg into a small earthen bowl for Pepper. Then she deftly placed an iron pan over the flame and set three eggs to frying. When they were done sizzling, she slipped one onto a dish with her fingers and, without saying a word, opened the peculiar hidey-door just to the right of the fireplace, reached her arm in, and placed it on the floor inside Hildegard's chamber.

"How do you know if she'll eat it?" wondered Christiana aloud.

"Later, when I go for her waste, the dish'll be there, too," Elsa said, matter-of-factly. "You know that. You're here most days."

"I know, but I find it odd and I can't stop thinking about it. What does she do in there all day?"

"She prays, mostly." Elsa flipped her palms toward the low ceiling. "She's also been making the lace for the Church. It's really beautiful," she said, unbolting the trunk

to display some of Hildegarde's work. She pushed her friend's dirty hand away genially when the younger girl reached out to touch it.

"It is. I've seen it at the market, too."

"I arranged for it to be sold there to help pay for other necessities, like these."

Elsa gestured for Christiana to help herself to one of the fried eggs. They ate quickly, and then Christiana challenged her to a game of Nine Men's Morris. With their pegs set on the board's concentric squares, they played by the light of the fire and could hear, faintly, the laughter and shouts of the village boys through the thick stone walls.

Christiana knew Evrard would be among them, but she imagined how he would hold back from the skirmishes. His good friends had already begun to peel away, like the curiously dimpled skin on the orange fruit her father had brought them at Christmas. The other boys sensed he was destined for the abbey, and, in fact, Christiana had overheard a conversation between her parents about it just last night.

"I think Evrard is going to be a monk," Christiana announced as Elsa took her fifth peg off the board.

"That is clear," Elsa replied, staring intently at the field of play. "He makes you pray with him all the time. One time—I don't think you know this story—I saw him kneel down in the middle of the market." Christiana's furrowed brow and incredulous sneer prompted Elsa to continue. "You were little. Littler than you are now, maybe only five years old, so he would have been nine or ten. You had seen a colorful butterfly and were after it. You were running away from him, and he couldn't get you to come back. Then the priest's cart turned the corner by the mill and you were nearly run over. You

pressed yourself up against the mill wall just in time. The whole scene happened in a single moment.

“I saw his entire reaction by watching his back. He was up on tiptoes, then frozen, then when you’d escaped harm, he was down on his knees giving thanks. He has quite a relationship with God!” She smiled as her opponent made her next move and then quickly jumped Christiana’s sixth man, leaving her young friend in that precarious but sometimes helpful final stage of the game with three men remaining. Christiana took advantage of it immediately by moving her marks in quick succession, but to no avail. Elsa made the final jump, and Christiana admitted defeat with a dramatically elongated sigh.

“I’ll be lonely if he goes to the abbey,” Christiana said quietly. The fire hissed and popped behind her.

“No, you won’t. You’ll be here with me!” The girls smiled at one another as Elsa added a log to the fire, and Christiana reset the board.

Chapter 4

It was unseasonably warm for late January, and Christiana suggested that she and Evrard hike toward Rochehaut, up the hill west of their village. Her mother, still abed, gestured for them to go, and then rolled over to face the wall. The siblings descended the outside stairs together, and Christiana’s mouth watered as they passed the open side doors

of St. Honore Bakery which occupied the level below their room. Without discussing it, the two turned into the shop.

Christiana waved at Eiki who was working the peel into the back of the vast oven. By way of returning the greeting, he pulled out several small loaves, designed for travel, and plopped them on the counter in front of her with a broad smile on his face.

“One’s for you, Christi,” he said. She reached for the one on the end, but Evrard, who had been talking to Eiki’s father about the family’s impending trip to the north, slapped her hand. It was only then she noticed she had been reaching for the one inverted loaf. For all his spirituality, Evrard could be awfully superstitious.

“Your brother wants you to leave that one for the hangman!” exclaimed Madam Baker, laughing good-naturedly. Christiana smirked and audaciously chose the cursed piece. Evrard shook his head, selected an upright loaf for himself, and thanked the Bakers before brother and sister continued on their way down the road toward the mill, as neighbors bustled about in the balmy weather.

While they walked, Evrard explained he’d promised to help espalier the apple trees in the abbey’s garden. They could travel together, but at the top of the hill, he’d leave her and continue on through the next valley.

“You’ll be all right alone?” he asked. She scowled, but let her brother take her hand anyway. They both knew she did what she pleased most of the time, seemingly without forethought and certainly without repercussion. Christiana understood that Evrard’s worry matched most fathers’, which was well because *their* father worried very little about her.

The siblings' conversation turned to a recent visitor. It was after the Christmas snows had melted that a smiling pilgrim, dirty as a pig in spring, returned from Santiago de Compostela and stopped at the bakery. He passed word that their father would be home before the baby arrived. At least Arend van Frahan was concerned about that. Mother, clearly relieved by the message, had invited the messenger to share their dinner.

"After he left us, Elsa said, the pilgrim prayed with Hildegard until compline. Then he slept in the butcher's barn, and disappeared north over the Semois early the next morning," Christiana divulged. They wondered in silence about the traveling life.

"Perhaps I'll meet Father along the way," Evrard said wistfully. Christiana had her doubts. He waved and moved west toward Rochehaut and Brother Martin's abbey.

Christiana walked the last stretch of a well-worn path and was rewarded with the view of her Frahan. It was not lush like the last time she'd been to this high point, traveling to Rochehaut's fair just before All Saint's Day. But it was beautiful nonetheless. The north half of the slope seemed chopped off by the hand of God. This area, she knew from exploring, was covered in rocky outcrops, and it sat just above their church.

On the right, though, the evergreens dropped less precipitously to cleared plots about a hundred steps below. It looked as if the sun had melted the south side of the hill. There she saw tiny sheep and goats dotting the landscape in Tanners' fields which rose above her neighbors' homes. Yellow piles of hay sat at neat intervals, while the mud tracks zigzagged haphazardly.

Her eyes moved back and forth across the landscape below. On the left was the wooden foot bridge crossing the Semois at its most narrow point. The villagers called it Angenent Bridge. She was excited to see some folks crossing the span away from the

parish, although from this distance, she could not discern who they were. A short path connected the bridge to the main thoroughfare that stretched like a smile from the north to the south. A handful of dwellings—she counted eight—stood along its length. From here, they looked pristine, but up close, she knew they were all in different states of disrepair. The ones closest to the mill on the right were cleaner and better maintained. *It's where the wealth is*, her father had explained. In truth, generations ago, the Tanner family had become freeholders, purchasing all the land in this remote location from Lord Roche, a notorious gambler. As yeomen, they sold off parcels which now belonged to Frahan's parishioners. With no wife or family remaining, Roche, on his deathbed, bartered his remaining property for his soul's entrance to Heaven by tithing his acreage to the Church and the Cistercian monks who started Rochehaut Abbey.

The river looped around behind Frahan's hill, embracing the small settlement on three sides. Christiana loved this unique geography, but her father scoffed and called it "insular" each time his wanderlust was about to rip the family apart.

Regarding Frahan from this height made her feel important, like God looking down on His people. Probably as a rebuke for this blasphemous thought, an icy wind kicked up behind her, and she pulled her woolen shawl up around her neck. She looked over her shoulder and was surprised to see dark clouds had formed in the time she'd sat there contemplating her village.

On her return trip down to the hollow separating Rochehaut from Frahan, she considered the panorama. She loved her birthplace, its evergreen hill, the seasons, and her warm hearth. She took deep breaths of the cold, fresh air and watched thick snowflakes drop out of the sky. They were the last ones she would ever welcome.

Chapter 5

Christiana arrived in the village three quarters of an hour later, and already three fingers of snow covered the ground. Her thin shoes cut dark ruts as she moved toward home. She passed the mill on the right. The main thoroughfare broke to the left. At the top of her road, the church was almost obscured by the heavy snowfall. She climbed the hill to the bakery, whose doors were now closed. No smell lingered from the morning's loaves. The air ponged of cold.

As she clambered up the outer stairs, she looked back toward the mill. All the villagers who'd been hastening about this forenoon were gone. The parish had a deserted feel. Like so many dormice, everyone had scurried away from this weather. She could see the tops of the same eight homes she'd spied from upon the hill, smoke rising from their chimneys, drawn away by the wind's folly. Finally, the cold chased her inside.

She found her mother asleep and the room cool. She listened for Baker and his family below, and, hearing no one, presumed they had finally made good on their promise to visit the uncle's home north of the Semois in advance of this storm. It must have been the Bakers she'd seen crossing the Angenent from the hill. A hand of snow now accumulated on the sill. She quickly reshuttered the window against the chill and the early-grey sky.

Christiana spied the pot of marten and barley soup. It had turned to stew, but it was still lukewarm and was flavored well. She ate a full bowl before deciding she was more tired than hungry. She dragged the down comforter from her own pallet and burrowed in to sleep beside her mother.

A bonfire leapt up around her. She couldn't seem to take a breath. The girl did not understand how she could be alight and underwater simultaneously. Of a sudden, the world yanked her violently from the fantasy. She inhaled mightily, and realized why she had been dreaming of a blaze—she was so hot. Too hot. Her mother's body was broiling the coverlet, the pallet, the room. All around her, sweat dampened the sheets.

Then Christiana heard a groan.

Something was amiss. Where was Evrard? Christ's nails, where was her father? She dashed to the window. As she opened the shutters, snow fell in on her feet and the wind wailed. She slammed the louver and moved to the door. In the dim light outside, Christiana could discern a drift covering most of the south side of the building. Here it was bitter cold. The howling came again, but when she attempted to block out the gale, she grappled with the sound. It emanated from within the quarters. The shrieking rose from her mother.

Chapter 6

Within the hour it was over. When light began to filter in through the shutters, still Christiana sat bolt upright on the bed—the bed her mother and father had shared since before she was born. She was born. Her little brother or sister was not born. Her sibling was not. Mother was not. Father was not. Here. Her father was not here. Evrard.

Chapter 7

First, Christiana cleaned up her own vomit. Then she rested. Next, she brushed the snow drift into the corner and closed the door. Then she rested. Later, she piled snow into a mug, held it near the embers, burned her hands, and wondered who had been daft enough to leave the door open during the night. She drank. Then she rested.

The sweat was not sweat, but blood. And instead of looking at her mother's waxy face, Christiana scraped the last of the stew into a bowl, filled the crock with snow, and placed it over the fire. She let the tepid water help her wash the residue from the vessel. She warmed more snow in the clean pot, and slowly and meticulously scrubbed sections of her beloved down comforter with her nails, trying desperately to avoid looking at the bed. She poured the water out the window and started over. The blanket would never truly be white again.

Hung over the bench by the fire, it dried quickly. She positioned herself on the hearth side of it to protect herself from the horror on the bed. Staring into the flames, she scrunched the cloth in sections, finding solace as the dry, stiff fabric turned soft again in her clenching fists. Suddenly, a loud sound exploded above, outside. When she threw open the shutters hoping for salvation, she heard the night fracture and rumble, saw blinding salvos of light in the sky. Who had ever heard of a snowstorm with thunder and lightning? She was more convinced than ever that she was still dreaming.

There was no more wood, and the fire burned down permanently. Once in a while, she would open the door and stare at the snow now as high as her own head. It got

light for a second time, and she ate the cold stew, and she looked at her mother's body, and she vomited again. She wept into it, life pressing her head darkly into the wood floor.

A hand squeezed her shoulder. She heard crying and wondered if it was her own—was, in a moment, in fact, fairly certain it was not. Arms wrapped around her waist, her thighs, her shoulders, and a yeasty face pressed tightly against her own, whispering God's name. What a comfort this was. What an enigma.

Chapter 8

The youngest Baker was the first person she saw when she opened her eyes.

"Eiki?"

"Christi, your mother. Your ma. Your mmm, mm, m." He put his head down on her arm, his shoulders shaking with sorrow. She appreciated how sad he was for her and put a hand on his cheek. Madam Baker leaned over her son and brought a cup of broth-soaked bread to her lips. Christiana drank it gratefully.

"Is she still upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Is Evrard returned?"

"No."

"Father?"

Less a question, more a statement. Met with silence.

The four Bakers rotated vigil and made bread, and the village of Frahan shambled back from the blizzard while the girl slept.

As luck would have it, Evrard *had* met his father on the road in front of the abbey, and they'd spent the storm comfortably inside its walls surrounded by mead and stories and apple tarts.

Chapter 9

They buried Mary in Sint Sebastian's graveyard, in one of the four preemptive graves the cheerful and diligent groundskeeper Piet dug each fall. Then, they walked home. Christiana's father paid Baker the rent and shoved his children up the stairs ahead of him into their apartment.

"I'm going to sleep." Someone had changed the bedding, and Christiana watched her father sink into slumber so quickly it scared her.

"Evrard, where's Ma?" she whispered.

"She's with God, Christiana."

"Where's the baby?"

"The same."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I do. Do you not?"

"I don't know what to believe, Evrard. I wish I was more certain like you are."

"You will be, eventually." Her brother's declaration reassured her, and later that evening she was able to climb into bed beside him and pray and sleep. She could not imagine what else there was to do.

Arend Van Frahan announced to his children that he would be leaving for Bruges the next morning. The matter was of utmost importance for their continued solvency, he said, and there was nothing to be discussed. Evrard was left in charge, but Christiana could see that it might break him. This cultivated her own dread.

“When will you return?” Evrard asked, almost frantically, as his father handed him a tiny burlap sack. Christiana heard the clink of coins within.

“I’ll be back when I’ve established trade with England,” he said cryptically.

He would not return until spring.

Chapter 10

Alone, Christiana visited her mother’s new grave several days after her father’s departure. As she sat in the stark cemetery facing the church, she contemplated Hildegard’s anchorhold from a fresh angle. Someone, likely Piet, had cut a path through the snow and exposed a small gap in the side of the hermitage. Long ago, the mason had deliberately omitted one large river rock, and she noticed the black cloth inside shift as she stared.

The girl rose slowly from her place by her mother and walked towards the anchoress.

Once she was an arm’s length away from the wall, she saw that Piet had deliberately carved a bench in that spot. She sat. Without a clue what to say, she coughed,

and in a moment, the dark fabric rustled, and a wizened face peered out, its expression noncommittal. Christiana's natural reaction was to smile, so she did. The rheumy eyes crinkled in response.

"God bless you, child."

"God bless you, uh, Hildegarde," she began haltingly. "My name is Christiana. I live here in Frahan. I am friendly with your...Elsa." They looked at one another for a silent moment. And then suddenly, Christiana's woes began to stream out of her like wine from a jug. As she talked, the pain diminished perceptibly. She thought to check her personal decantation.

She apologized, sounding uncharacteristically formal. "Oh, Hildegarde, I did not intend to unload my grief on you."

"Nonsense, Christiana. God has sent you to me this day. Would you pray with me?" So they prayed, and Christiana's affliction waned further. She made this known to the anchoress before taking her leave. The woman nodded sagely. As a farewell, Hildegarde encouraged the girl to return whenever she needed counsel.

Christiana was not certain why she felt simultaneously embarrassed and light and grown-up after visiting with the anchoress. She walked around the whole building and ambled south toward the main thoroughfare. The priest nodded a detached greeting as she passed the church's front step.

Chapter 11

“I’m tired of winter, Evrard. It’s just warm enough to go out, but wet enough to dampen my toes, which makes me miserable.”

Evrard waved her over to the psalter. With her mother gone and father absent, she’d spent hours possessed by the pages, but her knowledge of Latin was still limited. Her brother began to remedy that. She found it fairly easy once he helped her connect the priest’s prayers in church to the words penned on the page.

Later that evening, as they sat by the flames they’d conjured, Christiana considered a question that had been burning within her for a long time. Something of the maturity she had discovered through talking with Hildegard made her bold enough to ask.

“Father said he found our psalter in an abbey in France that was razed by fire. But, Evrard, it doesn’t smell like ash and it isn’t covered with cinders.”

“Our father does what pleases him, Christi. And sometimes it’s not likely what pleases God.” Evrard sneezed. Christiana and Evrard looked knowingly at one another because, of course, this proved the truth of the remark.

“And it certainly is not what pleases us.” Evrard sneezed again.

“We do alright.” No sneeze. Evrard cast a consoling arm around her neck. She deigned to give him some of the comforter. “But we have one another and our health and the Bakers and some coins remaining. And we have our faith, and that above all will shepherd us through.” He sounded more like a member of the clergy every day.

Next morning the air was warm, which was heartening. By afternoon, it was so clement that Christiana walked down to the river's edge, pulled off her turnshoes, and put her feet into the chilly water. The arches of her feet ached and yet she remained, using the Semois' gritty sand to scrub a winter's worth of dirt from her toenails. She waved hello to a neighbor Colin fishing from the bridge. He waved back genially, and then she sat facing the sun. In March, its heat was so much more satisfying than a fire. In November, that would reverse. Christiana lay back in the brown grass and stretched her body as far as it would go in every direction. In the brave, defiant light of the day, Evrard's words from the previous night pushed something plucky inside her to the fore. They were strong enough to make their way without their father.

The fisherman watched her nodding to herself and wondered if she was praying or if, instead, she was dimwitted.

Chapter 12

Her father returned at Easter, paid Baker for their quarters, and stayed just long enough to make Christiana prickly with his plans to marry her off to an old man he'd met in Bruges.

"I told him of your long blonde braid, your pale skin, your blue eyes, and your guile, and he is willing to pay the dowry." He said it with a smile on his face, but his words seemed spoken with malice. She was too young to marry and dreaded leaving the village she loved so well. She hoped he was being facetious, but she could not be sure.

Within a fortnight he'd handed his son a few coins and departed again into the wide world. To spite him, Christiana set out to have fun, her grumbling guts notwithstanding.

At the foot of the bridge, she and Elsa tried to best May's heat by alternately dipping into the river and resting in the fresh shade of an elder chestnut tree. They talked and played a finger game that Eiki had taught them.

Christiana narrowed her eyes and looked eastward to where the river disappeared around the backside of the hill.

"How long would it take us to travel the Semois all the way around, from here to the mill?" Christiana asked.

"What do you mean, travel?" asked Elsa, sitting upright. She recognized her friend's pensive gaze and was interested.

"I sometimes see logs floating downstream. And Evrard and I have thrown twigs off the bridge to race them. They move at a fair pace. Why not us?" To show what she meant, she grabbed a stick lodged near the tree's roots and flung it into the water. It bobbed and righted itself and sped away from them.

"The river's not deep enough for a proper boat, but we could lash branches together and drift. I wonder if it would work. Why haven't the boys ever thought of that?"

"We're more clever than boys," Christiana said, "because we have need to be."

The girls hiked up the hill to the church, where Elsa checked on her duties and, with her knife, cut lengths of twine from a store of it in the trunk in the anchorhold. They set off into the rocky woods that plummeted to the water. They gathered three thick, dry

boughs each and lashed them together into crude triangles. It took most of the afternoon, but the promise of an adventure sustained them.

As they worked, they plotted their journey. Both admitted to a rudimentary ability to swim because of Frahan's one deep swimming hole not far from the bridge. They decided that the worst that could happen was that their floats would fall apart or sink and they'd have to paddle to the edge of the river and trudge home. After much discussion, they decided not to launch from the bridge. They were afraid they'd be seen, mocked, and have their fun stolen from them.

Instead, they cut through the woods and set their floats behind a large boulder for safekeeping until the next day. Elsa ran all the way back to the church. She was worried she'd neglected her obligations to the anchoress. Christiana walked home alone as the sun began to set behind the western hills.

She passed the church on the right and saw the bridge casting its shadows downstream. Several of the village boys were, in fact, cavorting in the swimming hole, but she did not see Evrard. Further on, she saw the cottages. Deep in thought about plans for the next day's voyage and hurrying a bit from a senseless guilt, she tripped over a jutting rock. Her palms broke her fall, but blood rushed out. She sucked air in to quell the pain and pressed the red rivers into the sides of her frock. That made the sting worse, so she drew the tips of her fingers in to make fists to control the leaking and hastened on. She rounded the bend close to home, but did not notice her neighbor, the butcher's wife, gawking and making the sign of the cross.

The next morning dawned hot. The thought of starting a fire to heat oats made Christiana wince, so she wordlessly handed Evrard an apple and took two for her journey. She met Elsa at the door of the hermitage.

“What if this takes all day? What did you tell Hildegard?” she whispered.

“I simply told her I had an errand in Rochehaut and not to expect me until dusk. She said a prayer for my safe travels!” The girls giggled together nervously.

As they put in the river, Christiana remembered her cut palms. At first the water stung, but the coolness cleansed the wounds and she soon forgot about them in the hilarity which followed. Each girl maneuvered in the knee-deep stream, trying not to let go of and lose her float. Christiana was first to try sitting back, angling her bottom into the open space of the triangle. She promptly flipped over backward. Sputtering, she came up to hear her friend sounding like the Tanners’ donkey.

“You try!” she said indignantly, but soon found she could not suppress her own laughter. Elsa’s backside was too big for her triangle, so they switched and that made the difference. Soon enough, their arms and legs dangled outside their floats. They’d been smart enough to tie themselves together with a remnant of the rope, and they drifted east, away from Frahan, toward the rapidly rising sun.

Within a few moments, they could no longer see the bridge or any vestige of the village. The girls were silent. For an instant, Christiana wished she’d told Evrard or Eiki or even Madam Baker of today’s plan. Then, she considered what her father’s reaction would be if he were here. She was sure he would disapprove and suddenly this risky adventure made her feel free and strong, and those feelings chased away any remaining qualms. The girls looked at one another with wide eyes. Elsa’s impish smile conveyed

that she had, in that trice, run the identical gamut of emotions and landed in the same place as her young friend.

For the next quarter of an hour, the girls swirled in the Semois' currents, studying the uninhabited knoll on the right as they moved downstream.

"Hildegard told me that two hermits once lived here." Christiana peered up towards the peak.

"Where?"

"In a cave." They scanned the hillside but found no cavern to satisfy their curiosity.

"What a lonely spot," Elsa observed. "Imagine wanting to be a recluse and living in the wild like this? One's commitment to God must be strong."

"And one's bond to his neighbors weak."

The sun continued to climb in the sky. The girls splashed one another and ate the apples. Elsa told the story of her parents and how she'd come to be Hildegard's servant, although Christiana had heard the tale before.

"My mother was lost in childbirth, leaving only my father and me. He hired a wet nurse..."

"...Hildegard's sister..."

"...from Rochehaut." Elsa nodded. "Her own baby had just died, and her husband, like your father, was a merchant so he was absent for long stretches of time. You know well the trouble that causes those left behind." It was Christiana's turn to nod, eyes closed and with anger working on her mouth.

“By trade, my father was a beekeeper, but he was no businessman. So he often took odd jobs. When Hildegarde was installed in the anchorhold, I was ten.”

Christiana couldn't remember this part of the narrative, but she knew it involved Elsa's father's death. She sat up and stared intently at her friend.

“The day they brought Hildegarde down into Frahan by cart, my father was driving the team. The cart got stuck in a rut, and with the whole village watching, he got down on his knees to remove the stone from in front of the wheel. The closest horse kicked, clipping his head and killing him instantly.” Elsa stared off into the distance, as if the memory was playing for her in the hills. No one had talked to Christiana of death since her mother's. Everything abruptly took on a vivid cast—the glints on the water, the green leaves of the ash trees, the ducks floating by the far bank—as if the specter of death made her more alive.

To elude the surreal feeling, she asked, “How did you come to be in Hildegarde's service?”

“Well, obviously, her enclosure was delayed by the tragedy, but the bishop was in a hurry to have the ceremony. The maiden who originally intended to serve took my father's violent end as a sign, and she ran off with the boy she'd loved in Rochehaut. As a quick cover to save the bishop embarrassment, Hildegarde suggested I take her place. She's since told me she felt responsible for my father's death, and she was grateful that he'd been so kind to her sister all those years ago. I suppose she did what she could to honor him by protecting me.”

Christiana pondered the relationship between anchoress and servant. “And you've been with her ever since.”

“It’s been three years. I can’t quite remember her face.” There was a long pause.
“Or my father’s.”

They heard distant chimes signaling midmorning prayers. They wondered if the bells belonged to Sint Sebastian’s or another nearby town’s church. The sound was distorted by the surrounding hills. Elsa shared her roasted nuts, a bit sodden but still satisfying.

Sometime later, they rounded another bend, and the mill came into hazy view in the distance. The parish looked strange to them from this upstream perspective, but Christiana had never loved it more. In all her years, she realized this day had been the longest she’d ever been away from it. She rocked her body and hove herself into the water, maintaining her grasp on the float.

“Let’s go ashore here so no one notices us.” Wordlessly, Elsa slid into the river and they waded to the edge. They hid their boats and dried in the sun before picking their way through the Tanners’ fields. Promising to have that particular adventure again soon, they parted ways at the mill, each hurrying home. Christiana was awake enough to remember to put a salve of goose grease and yarrow on her palms and her sunburned face, but she was asleep before the bells rang for vespers.

The following day was overcast and not as hot, so Evrard decided he would walk to the abbey to weed the gardens with Brother Luke, leaving Christiana to her own devices. Instead of studying the psalter as she normally would have done on a day like this, she took some of their rope and alone hunted the forest for wood to fashion two more floats. She hid all four behind the boulder again. Then, she stopped at the

anchorhold and prayed with Hildegarde, waving to Piet as she passed him. She made an insubstantial supper for Evrard, who arrived home to find his sister poring over the book of psalms as he suspected she would be.

Eiki and Evrard admired Christiana's resourcefulness and cunning when she unveiled their new vessels the next sweltering day. The boys enjoyed the ride as much as she and Elsa had, and that summer they would repeat the trip a dozen times before the floats unraveled and the leaves began to turn and fall.

Chapter 13

Evrard and Christiana spent Michaelmas alone. They went to the fair and used one of their remaining coins on two quills. The monks had taught Evrard to make ink from ash paste, and he, in turn, taught his sister. Most of their days were spent helping to harvest in the Tanners' fields, but in the evenings, they practiced their writing on the empty vellum of the psalter. Christiana took to illustrating the pages herself, scratching out her mistakes with a knife and starting again.

On one sheet, she drew Pepper reaching for a butterfly, which formed the letter B. On another, she depicted Frahan from high on the hill, carefully drawing the bridge on the left, the Semois disappearing around the bend, each of her neighbors' homes, the church, the butcher's hut, the bakery, the smithy, the dairy, and the mill on the right. She never could make the village represent a letter of the alphabet, so she removed that page from the psalter and kept it folded in fabric under her sleeping pallet. Evrard had moved

to their parents' bed in her father's absence because, although it was larger and more comfortable, Christiana could not bear to sleep in it. Regardless of where she slept, she often dreamed of her mother. Upon waking, her chest ached profoundly, as if it were confined in an iron cage.

She spent hours a day honing her craft, becoming proficient in a very short time. She made weak red ink from dried ground poppies and river water. She generated a tolerable green from the wings of dead beetles one neighbor, the mason Mattheus, had pinched from his bean plants and, for some unfathomable reason, had saved in a jug since summer. Her favorite picture was that of Hildegard's anchorhold, the bartizan serving as an A on the page where she'd copied a prayer she repeated often when her stomach yearned for a genuine meal.

Most days, she attended Mass, simply to practice reading one of the two Bibles there. Unless Evrard accompanied her, Father Villenc eyed her suspiciously throughout the service, but she kept a neutral face as she studied the text.

On the eve of 1299, Evrard put their last two coins under their bowls to draw luck for the coming year. This strategy was to fail miserably.

Chapter 14

Arend van Frahan returned one cold winter afternoon a week into the new year to the apartment above St. Honore's Bakery. When he had removed his pack and cloak, Christiana noticed he was thicker in the waist than the last time he'd visited. He wore a bright, unsoiled tunic the color of a morning glory and new leather boots. She watched blearily from the bed as he scanned the room. His disdain was evident when he saw the dried plants hanging randomly from the ceiling, the wash draped over the table and benches, the makeshift ink pots, and the unswept hearth. Her sore throat hadn't tolerated her gathering wood these last two days, but the Bakers' ovens had kept them sufficiently warm. She swallowed and winced. Poppy tea would soothe her, but there was no fire. She heard Evrard cough, that rough sound he'd been making all week, and she became furious with her father, who stood frowning.

"Welcome home, Father," she said, barely containing the venom in her voice.

"Why are you still abed?" he asked.

"We're both ill," replied Evrard, apologetically. *This is what happens when you don't eat*, Christiana added in the argument she was having with her father in her head. Arend heaved his pack onto the floor and walked out with a sigh. Both children rolled over and went back to sleep. When she woke, the room was comfortably warm and a chunk of meat was boiling in the pot. Christiana wanted to cry for the smell.

"...and so with your permission, I'd like to permanently join the abbey," Evrard was whispering, "but I must know you'll be here to take care of Christiana, Father. These

last months have been difficult. The money dwindled quickly and the work we did for Tanner only earned us a very small amount of grain. The Bakers have been kind, but..."

"I see you've bought quills and candles," Father responded tersely. And then after a moment, he said, "I will stay, and you may go to the abbey. Your mother and I knew this day would come. You pray so well." Father laughed derisively, and she saw Evrard's shoulders relax despite the ridicule. "Come eat, Christiana," he said without turning. "I need to fatten you up for that old man in Bruges."

As she sat with her dwindling family, she did not deny herself the pleasure of the meat her father had procured for them. She saw the hovel from her father's perspective and remembered the beloved psalter. It was unintentionally hidden under Evrard's jerkin. There was no doubt it belonged now to her. It was her only possession in the world, the place where she practiced her art and her words. Her soul could live in its pages for hours without knowledge of time's passage. It needed protection. She narrowed her eyes, and her frenzied mind began to visualize a potential scheme.

When her father left to hunt on the hill later that day, she fought her infirmity and layered as many clothes as she could, allegedly to keep warm, and snuck away with the psalter under her garments. She went first to Elsa and relayed her tale of woe. Elsa, always a pragmatist, said she could not keep it. At any time, the priest or the bishop's suffragan or the bishop himself might visit Hildegarde.

"They cannot go into the anchorhold, of course, but they have come in to this room and asked to see how I keep the quarters. It has not happened often, but there are rules I must follow as the anchoress's servant, and having personal objects unrelated to

my duties is forbidden. I would never be able to explain a psalter!” *They cannot go into the anchorhold, of course*, thought Christiana.

For the next several weeks, her father moved from job to job as the illness spread through the village. First, he slaughtered pigs when the butcher and his son were afflicted. Then, he ground grain while the miller was possessed by the malady. He milked the goats at Tanners’, pounded dough for the Bakers, and managed the neighbors’ traps in the woods. Christiana and Evrard hadn’t eaten so well in months, and they slowly regained their health. Christiana even heated water to bathe. But though her stomach was full, her guts nagged her as she waited for Arend to ask about the book. When the old butcher succumbed to the disease, her father found more permanent work with the son. Evrard made his arrangements with the abbey. Christiana’s monthly courses began. She thanked God for her mother’s foresight in telling her about the coming of her “flowers,” and she’d followed her tactic of wrapping a rag tightly around her waist and between her legs to staunch the flow under her kirtle. To have to talk to her father about such things would have left her mortified. Her face grew red at the mere thought of that conversation.

Meanwhile, the Bakers’ older boy, Jan, announced his plans to marry Berte, the prettiest dairymaid. Madam Baker smiled full and genuine, persistently announcing, “They’ll be kept in bread and butter all their lives!” The family began to organize wedding plans, all of them talking and laughing loudly below. Christiana was afraid she knew the next item on the family’s list: where the newlyweds would live. Logically, it would be the apartment upstairs from the bakery. Her dread grew like rising dough, presumptuous and somehow dangerous, despite a lack of sharp edges.

On Good Friday, Christiana, Evrard, and their father set off on foot toward Rochehaut. They climbed the hill to Frahan's west, and she looked back toward her village. She noticed the light green haze that enveloped the trees on all the slopes which suggested they were about a week away from popping their leaves. The air smelled of dirt and rain and the inside of a hatched egg, and Christiana knew she should feel reborn as spring approached. But instead she felt like the hangman's noose was tightening about her neck. When they reached the monastery, the large wooden gates were open, and the visitors could hear the whinnying of horses, cluck of chickens, and rustle of robes. There was, of course, little talking, and that was well because their undersized party was largely reticent. Several of the monks, passing by on holy day errands, smiled and waved at Evrard in recognition and welcome.

She wondered what Evrard was thinking today, making this step from postulant to novice. She grabbed his hand and squeezed in a show of affection and support; Evrard squeezed back and looked at her. On his face, a grand smile attempted but failed to hide his teeth as he readjusted the pack on his shoulder. That grin reached all the way to his eyes, and it answered all of her questions. Evrard was exactly where he wanted to be, and she envied him. He would have access to the great books in the monastery's library. He would never be forced to marry a stranger to free their father. He would shirk the cold, and he would never go hungry. Christiana would leave him today in this cloister, and she might only see him a handful of times the rest of her life, even though the monastery was only half a day's walk from Frahan.

The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience would follow, he'd explained eagerly time and again as the two of them alone had tried to fill the long evening hours

with conversation. Within a year, he would be clothed in the black robes permanently, renouncing the world and its fashion and its ways. She tried not to laugh at the thought of him with a tonsure. She knew it was blasphemous, but a monk's bald spot always looked ridiculous to her. At least his face would remain clean-shaven. All his work in the orchard made him an excellent candidate for the abbey's gardens, and she knew Evrard looked forward to growing the fruits and vegetables for the monastery. Evrard's commitment overwhelmed Christiana, who simply wanted to be permitted to make a few of her own choices, not a likely occurrence with her father present and her dowry looming.

With no formal ceremony to attend, they had an awkward moment until the abbot appeared. He whispered a few words about ale to Arend, smiled at Christiana, and then he and Evrard were disappearing across the open expanse of the courtyard. The tiny, enclosed Christian town had just received its newest resident with barely a ripple in its daily events.

On the mostly silent walk home, Christiana considered the options for her own future. The camaraderie living inside the abbey's walls would exist in a convent as well. Unfortunately, a nunnery expected vows she was not willing to take, and money she was sure her father was not willing to give. The other alternative, it seemed, was to be married away to a smelly, unshorn old merchant in a distant Flanders city, for this was how she inevitably pictured her possibly fictitious suitor. Her choices rent her with misery.

As if sensing her thoughts, her father asked, "What develops in that conniving mind of yours, Christiana?"

“I was thinking about how proud I am of Evrard, and the gifts a life devoted to God would offer.”

“Don’t ponder ideas about entering a convent, girl. I’ve not the resources to pay the dowry. Nunning is for the wealthy, and we are not that.” In sarcastic agreement, Christiana blew air out her nostrils like a horse. “Besides, I’ve not known you to be a particularly pious girl.”

“You’ve not known me at all.”

As the weather warmed, Christiana’s heart chilled. Her father expected her to rise early to set the fire, haul water from the Semois and their waste to the woods, cook sausages for breakfast, wash his breeches and the floor, and bring bread, cheese, and ale to the butchery all before the sext bells rang. The hard work wasn’t the problem. Her own desires were. On hot days, she wished for a carefree float down the river. She missed her time with Elsa and Eiki. She grieved for—and now appreciated—her mother. And she often thought longingly of her letters and illustrations in the psalter. One of the only good aspects of her brother’s joining the abbey was that she could easily lie and say that Evrard must have brought the book with him. In fact, she’d left it with Hildegard for safekeeping the day Arend had returned in January.

At night, he lectured her about the expectations of husbands and the necessity of virtue—this as he drank flagon after flagon of Trappist ale, which he often sold for profit about Frahan. Sometimes she waited until he began on the “duties to family” before she drank a cup of the bitter beer herself.

Chapter 15

One evening that fall of 1299, Christiana scrubbed the stubborn pot after a meal of bone broth, marten, and vegetables. As she wrangled with the crock, her father and Baker talked outside, below the stairs. The conversation traversed a number of topics. First came the ever-present anxiety as the turn of the century approached. The men entertained the idea of Judgment Day at midnight of the New Year. Her father scoffed, but the Bakers were considering joining the penitents in church. They moved on to discussions of Berte and Jan's baby, who would be born sometime in early spring. Without having to say so, the baby's birth and the Bakers' choice to join the priest were connected. Because of this disclosure, Baker seemed abashed and stopped short of asking Arend to relocate. Neither did Arend offer. Perhaps they were waiting to see if the world really did end. *It would save the Bakers an awkward conversation*, she reasoned wryly.

Then Baker asked, "How is butchering?"

"Despise it," her father replied. She heard him spit. "I cannot relieve the smell, no matter how many pots of hot water I draw." *I draw*, Christiana thought. "The son is tight-fisted, and the work is back-breaking and causes me melancholy. If there was a promise of some decent entertainment to lift the spirits, I wouldn't mind it, but Frahan is so insular." Christiana's guts plummeted, for she knew what came next.

Later, he promised Christiana he would return by Christmas with a marriage arranged, and he was gone within the week.

The wassailers had come and gone, and still her father hadn't reappeared. Somehow their isolated little community drew the interest of the surrounding populace as December waned. Perchance they believed that God would overlook this out-of-the-way hamlet on his day of judgment. Perhaps it was that Hildegard resided here, and the neighboring inhabitants sought to ease their fears with her prayers. Most likely, Frahan's fields, filling with erstwhile friends of the Tanners preparing to mock the penitents and carouse into the new year, were the appeal. Her village was taking on a pensively festive air.

Because her coin purse was as depleted as a dry well, she decided to sell the leftover ale to the Tanners' revelers on the thirty-first of December. She bartered a flagon of it for the butcher's pushcart and made her way to the lea, where bonfires had already been lit in anticipation of sunset. Her wares sold quickly, and she returned home at dusk.

As the evening progressed, she heard the solemn hymns floating towards her from the open doors of Sint Sebastian Church and thought of Evrard in his monastery. She wished they were together for this event, for his scraps of spirituality had a way of calming her. The psalms mixed discordantly with the shouts and songs of the merrymakers at the other end of the village, and Christiana wondered where her father was spending this night. Although she did not relish his homecoming, this sudden loneliness made her pine for company. Going to Elsa was presently not an option; Hildegard's visitors would certainly overwhelm the anchorhold.

It was a clear, mild night, and a remaining cup of ale emboldened her. She donned a thick wool wrap and mittens and, with no one to forbid her, thirteen-year-old Christiana decided to join those chasing their fears in the fields. She might find Eiki or one of the

friendly dairy maids there for company. In her haste for camaraderie, she'd forgotten that the Bakers were congregated at the church.

Up ahead, bonfires blazed high and the merriment drew her forth. She'd not met a scene so joyful since Jan's nuptials.

"He who pays the piper calls the tune," someone shouted. A meagre band of minstrels began a raucous, raunchy rendition of "Wench, Bring Me for Ale." She was glad she'd turned south away from the pious and dour proceedings at the church. The wider world might be a bit of fun. Smiling, she cut her way through the piles of hay populated by cavorting couples, but before she entered the circle of festive light, she felt a tug on her long braid and pulled up short, turning to chastise one of her neighbor's sons.

Instead a fist met her face and pain stunned her. She was spun to the dark side of a haystack, her braid was rammed in her mouth so that she could not holler, and her head was shoved deep into the straw. She gasped and floundered as a heavy body came down on top of her, forcing her knees apart. A warning heat traveled up her back and exploded in reason, and she realized what was happening to her. She squeezed her legs together. The man grunted in protest, jabbing his elbow into her thigh. The agony was immeasurable. Instinctively, her hands lashed out, but the wool covering them softened the intended blows. She thought to remove the mittens and scratch where she imagined eyes would be, but by then—it had only been a few seconds since the first blow—the assailant had maneuvered her stockings below one hip and pushed his heavy cushion of flesh against her cold belly.

In a perversion of romance, he spit on his hand and stroked her between her legs with his palm before jamming his manhood into her. The virgin tissue seared. She felt

tears slinking into the chaff as she kicked and thrashed. She heard a group pass close by, laughing at what they perceived an amorous rendezvous. She tried to work her tongue around the braid so she could call out, but it was as if he'd anticipated this tactic. He put his fingers around her throat while he continued his assault. Each thrust felt as if his hand would break her windpipe, and she began to feel much more anxious about air than chastity. Some of the straw fell away, but, though she sought his face, it was too dark. Her sight dimmed further until blissful unconsciousness loomed. This was, perhaps, how the world ended.

Part II

Chapter 16

A knock at the door woke her and poured red-hot fear into her bowels. In a blink of her swollen eyes, all manner of wickedness returned to her from two nights past. Had he come to finish her off? Self-preservation was paramount, but she realized he, whoever *he* was, would not rap politely before he came in to strangle her. Nor would her father. The knock came again, and its civility calmed her. But her nose and neck and groin throbbed, and she imagined what she must look like. How would she ever explain this without the burden of explaining, without the revulsion of reliving?

She had not yet tested her voice, so she made a coughing sound. It was insufficient. Eiki called quietly, “Christiana, are you in?” She decided to mound the comforter over her face and ignore him. She heard him shuffling around on the steps for a few moments, and then he climbed back down to his family’s quarters below. After a time, she willed herself to get out of bed and drop the wood plank into its stanchions to block the entrance. She chided herself for not having performed this important task sooner.

The toppled water jug sat empty beside the bed the next afternoon. While Christiana kneaded her sore neck the way she’d seen Madam Baker work the dough, another individual, with footfalls heavier than Eiki’s, made her way to the door. Christiana’s panic ascended with each step, but the whistle was familiar. Elsa. She’d be difficult to divert.

“Christiana, Eiki says you’re sick. Do you need anything?”

“No,” she croaked in reply. This would not be believed. Christiana always needed something.

“Let me in.”

“No,” she said again, stronger this time. “I don’t want to make you ill.”

“Hildegard is dead.” This stopped Christiana, and she pulled in a breath, held it. The information was surely true, but it was tendered like a pawn to entice.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a genuinely meek voice.

“Let me in, Christi.”

“No, Elsa.” She paused. “I’ll come visit you when I’m feeling better.”

“I don’t know where I’ll be.” For a time Christiana suffered guilty silence and then she heard her friend tromp down the stairs. She fell back into the bed—her parents’ bed. She had worse demons now than her mother’s death, and she could stand the comfort for her whole body ached.

Eiki and Elsa each returned twice over the next several days, leaving water and food for their friend. Finally, one evening five days after the attack, she admitted Elsa, who was homeless now that Hildegard was gone.

“You’ll stay here with me.”

“Until what? And what will your father say when he reappears?” Elsa asked, exasperated, clearly having depleted this line of thinking over the last few days.

“I don’t care what he says. When you leave your daughter to fend for herself, you cannot judge the way in which she fends.” She sounded surer than she felt. But then Elsa sat on the edge of the bed, and the decision was made. Decorum was not going to benefit

either of them, and they both realized they had few options. Christiana had the same feeling as when they'd ventured out on the river—there were unobtrusive, self-serving things she could do, would do, without asking permission, like giving her friend a home. If an action wasn't hurting anyone, she would not concern herself with what her father might consider a misdeed.

Elsa untucked a parcel from her pack and handed her friend the psalter. Thorny, hot tears pricked Christiana's eyes as she held the book. She hugged it, placed her head on the straw pillow, and listened to the story of Hildegarde's demise.

"She's been—*had* been—weak for a long time. But the hordes of people drawn by the century's turn burdened her spirit. She was gracious and kind, of course, but the people were scared. *I* was scared that night, weren't you?" Christiana nodded in the dark, which thankfully covered the murky circles she knew were around her eyes. Elsa must have felt her affirmative gesture and continued, "They seemed to be sucking the humors out of her, but she wouldn't hear of turning them away.

"After the bells rang matins, most people relaxed and began to fall asleep camped outside the anchorhold. I invited two women with tiny children into my quarters as it got colder. We were crowded, but happy that midnight had passed without doomsday." She laughed nervously, recalling the night's brief distortion of reality. Christiana remained reticent, not trusting herself to speak lest she spill her own story. She did not know what caused her shame, only that it existed and coiled unctuously in her chest.

"Early the next morning, Father Villenc left Frahan in a hurry, to meet the bishop in Bouillon. The penitents scattered like geese as he departed, and we were finally alone. I left an egg for her breakfast, but when I went for her waste later, the egg lay untouched,

which was the first sign that something was wrong.” The meager candlelight caught Elsa’s eyes brimming with tears. “I called to her, which I rarely have—had—need to do. It is one of the rules I follow, not to call on the anchoress, but for her to call on me, so that I don’t interrupt her prayers for frivolous reasons.” Elsa said this stiffly, in a way that Christiana assumed she’d learned through drilled practice with someone of authority, likely the priest.

Her friend continued the account of the day. “She didn’t answer my calls from my room or from outside her window where just hours before she’d prayed with the penitents. With Father Villenc gone, I ran to Piet for help. We entered the church, and we shouted to her from the altar. When there was no response, he asked me to step up on his interlaced hands and look through the squint, where normally Hildegarde would take part in Mass.” Christiana remembered the priest passing the host through the cross-shaped window during services. “He felt it improper to look in on her himself. I’m glad he suggested it, because I could see her half naked body sprawled, unmoving on her bed.

“We hurried back outside, trying to decide what to do. It was rather easy for Piet to chop away several stones from the base of the anchorhold, and I was able to wiggle in.” Christiana gasped, remembering the fear of being alone with her own mother’s body and realizing the depth of the servant’s loyalty to her anchoress. “As Piet broke chunks of stone away, I cleaned her body and wrapped it in a shroud. I kept thinking she was going to be cold.” Elsa’s voice cracked with emotion.

Christiana raised the comforter so Elsa could climb in beside her to rest after recalling that horrid day. “What have you been doing since?”

“I’ve been taking my time cleaning the anchorhold, burning her bedding, washing the few clothes she had, organizing what’s in the chest. God forgive me, I sold some of the lace at the market and sewed the coins into my hem.” She worked them out of her dress and showed them to Christiana. “Then I scrubbed the stone floor of the church and the wooden pews, since so many people had come in and out. I wondered if maybe one of them had an illness and passed it to Hildegard. I was angry at whoever it was. I took that anger out on the church’s dirt, for a week. And then Father Villenc returned today, thanked me for my service, and here I am.”

A gibbous moon emerged from behind a cloud. Bright, milky light filled the room. Christiana shook her head indignantly. She was angry, too. Mad at the priest’s apathy and the Church’s *boul*, mad at the horse who’d kicked her friend’s father, mad at their mothers for being dead; mad at God. Mad at her father for selling her to the highest bidder, mad at the covetous bridegroom in Bruges, mad at the nebulous villain who had cheated him of her virginity; mad that she had thought of her virginity as the old man’s already.

Her heart was racked with fury. She did not want to rage against herself for being helpless, for she sensed then hope would be lost in her soul’s downstream. When the anger turned inward, she repositioned it, as one moves a candle closer to its object, pursues, illuminates, and razes uncertainty. She hoped this glow of madness might elucidate an answer to their problem.

Christiana assured Elsa they would devise a plan, and this time her proclamation held some conviction. Each lost girl prayed in silence for the same unknowable outcome and then slept peacefully for the first time since the new century began.

Chapter 17

“Let’s amass our coins.”

When she saw the bitty pile, Elsa laughed, “I think ‘amass’ is too strong a word.” Four King Edward long crosses, twelve Brabant mites, one old Cavalier, and three turnose sat on the rough-hewn table. They debated whether to pay the Bakers two months’ rent with this treasure—which might not leave them enough for food—or instead try to buy and sell more ale to fund themselves for a more distant future. Christiana knew who the buyers were, but she was afraid to interact with any in that crowd, afraid even to walk in the direction of the Tanners’ farm. Just thinking about it made the bile climb her throat and her skin feel flea-bitten. To deceive her friend, she argued that her father’s supplier, the monks, and buyers, their neighbors, would not likely trade once they saw they were girls.

She soon found that she was mostly wrong. The next day, seemingly unbidden, a delivery arrived at the door from Rochehaut Abbey. It was a fresh batch of ale, as if summoned by their conjecture. A monk stood patiently outside as the girls bickered in whispers about what to do regarding this unforeseen development. Elsa ended the argument in favor of accepting the ale when she hissed, “One does not go to the mill with ideas.”

They profited from the brother’s misunderstanding. Christiana had the monk believe she was paying on her father’s behalf, that he had just gone to hunt and had left the transaction to her. She confidently held her palm up with all their coins balanced thereon, wincing internally at this audacious bluff. The cleric, who’d quietly introduced

himself as Bernart, seemed to champion local patrons over far-flung benefactors when he took ten mites and the Cavalier as payment. She heard Elsa inhale deeply behind her and realized she, too, had been fretting the deal's outcome.

Soon, compliant Brother Bernart was gone back down the hill toward the mill and eventually up the incline towards Rochehaut. Christiana imagined his long walk to the abbey, pushing the handcart before him. Following Bernart in her mind to the monastery brought her face to face with a shadow of her brother. Had Evrard been responsible for growing the barley for malt or tending the bees for the braggots' honey? Did he have a tonsure yet? Was he happy? Had he heard about Hildegard? How often did he think of his sister?

As Elsa traveled from hut to hut selling their merchandise, Christiana read and reread the short letter that Evrard had tucked amongst the jugs. Although it mentioned her, it was addressed to her father. Thus she learned Arend had not stopped at the abbey to tell her brother she was alone. Her father's disregard was maddening.

The neighbors' appetite for well-brewed ale left them disinterested in the gender of its sellers. Later that night, Christiana marveled over the pile of long crosses they'd accumulated, and then chastised herself aloud for not asking the young monk to wait while she penned a letter for Evrard.

"The luxuries of vellum and family have become unfamiliar to you," Elsa consoled in jest. "You've been missing that unfinished Book of Psalms and your brother for more than a year now."

She paid the Bakers for the next month but saw a look of concern pass between them. *Having a poor, parentless peasant girl living upstairs from a growing family must*

be a burden, she thought. Her anger at her father flared again but failed to illuminate a solution. Instead, it made her physically ill, and she vomited over the railing as she hurried upstairs. She realized she hadn't left the house in over a week, and being outside made her feel vulnerable to *him*. She ran the rest of the way up the steps as if she were being chased, slamming the door behind her. Elsa gazed at her suspiciously before going back to stirring the pot hanging over the fire in the hearth.

Chapter 18

Two more weeks passed, and still Arend van Frahan had not returned. In the pack she'd brought, Elsa carried both the Nine Men's Morris board and the chess set the fisherman had carved for Hildegard. Father Villenc had never known about them and so they were hers, Elsa argued. Christiana agreed. The girls enjoyed some freedom, playing games, cooking different stews with the birds and rodents from their traps in the woods and the spices Elsa purchased at the market, and drawing. Sometimes they invited Eiki. Christiana found if she did not go outside, she was able to keep her anxiety in check. She had forgotten how much she enjoyed writing and illustrating. She drafted a benign letter to Evrard, and when Brother Bernart returned with a new batch of ale at the end of January, she was ready. They gave him their customers' empty flagons and the letter. This time, the monk smiled at them before he left.

The winter days became repetitive and turned into weeks. Without discussion, Elsa performed all of the duties connected with the village, like gathering eggs, buying

candles, and removing their waste. Every time her friend stepped out into the world, Christiana wanted to warn her of the dangers awaiting. But then she remembered her own carefree attitude about life before the assault and she desired that for her friend more. Plus, if she cautioned Elsa, she'd have to explain the root of her fears, and to do so would unfasten the secret hidden in her chest.

Instead, she used her energies to clean the apartment, setting up a makeshift altar, where she prayed for a secure future, and a writing table by the window, where she copied the words of the psalter painstakingly. Soon, her hand was better than that of the original monk who'd penned the prayers within. They found they could live on very little, she and Elsa, and as yet, the Bakers had not discussed eviction although they were now fully aware of the living arrangement upstairs.

A scrawny Pepper showed himself at the door on Sint Valentine's Day, to the girls' delight. They wondered solicitously where the cat had been since Elsa's eviction, and they cosseted him with extra food and attention. Christiana took a nap with the cat every afternoon. Her friend didn't seem perplexed by this odd behavior, and Christiana realized Elsa had no basis for comparison. She'd never had a brother or sister and had spent much time beside the anchorhold unaware of what Hildegard was doing. Maybe Hildegard had taken a nap every day for an hour or two. How would her servant have known? Meanwhile, Elsa prowled the town for news and gossip, which she had enjoyed as a consequence of her job and for which she now had an inordinate demand.

She returned with tidbits of scandal and fed them to Christiana who marveled at their sordid quality and their ability to absorb her attention. For instance, the day after Sint Valentine's day, several neighbors were violently ill when they shared a roe deer one

had felled in the woods. Everyone knew that venison generated melancholic blood, but the butcher's mother, who passed these tidings on to Elsa with relish, seemed to think the ferocity of the malady would put an end to deer hunting altogether in Frahan, bringing her family great fortune since they kept and slaughtered mostly pigs.

The next day yielded more natter. This time it came from the shepherd's son, Grote. In the villagers' rush to grind grain before Lent, Clara, one of the Tanner women, lost her hand in a mill accident. She'd been unconscious for three days, and the Tanners were unsure if she would live.

"Grote said, 'The stump is hot and puss-filled' as if he were relating what Sint Nicholas had left him in his shoe! Nasty little boy. I didn't bother to ask him where he had got his information. They'd called for the physician from Rochehaut to come bleed her.

"I was feeling bold, so I made my way over to the Tanners' farmhouse and knocked at their door." Christiana shuddered at the thought of crossing that field. "I told them I'd heard about the tragedy and asked if I could assist them in any way. Madam Tanner said, 'We could use your anchoress about now' in a haughty tone, like it's my fault that Hildegard is dead with her daughter about to follow right behind her. Just then, the physician arrived and so I got lost in the confusion. You know how many Tanners there are." So Elsa stayed during the procedure, and in turn, she described what she'd seen in such detail that Christiana felt faint. The girls prayed for Clara Tanner while Pepper stalked their feet under the comforter.

One afternoon in early March, more chinwagging produced a shocking morsel for the two girls to discuss. Two filthy men with long beards and lean horses had ridden

down the hill into Frahan. The Deckere brothers, Ghoris and Martin, had reappeared years after all hope of any Crusader returning to the village had faded. Ghoris' wife, Lelien, had taken up with the blacksmith and bore him four children in the extended time her husband had been gone. When Ghoris found her outside the smithy and realized what had happened, he used some of his remaining strength to beat Lelien right there in the street until his oldest sons were able to grab and restrain him.

“Those Deckeres hadn't seen their blood father in eight years, and the first time they lay eyes on him, they have to stop him from killing their mother.”

“What's happening to our village?” Christiana asked incredulously.

The next day, Elsa came back with some crucial information. Beau Sejour had opened its doors, and she'd seen Brother Bernart leaving the inn with his customary empty flagons, which likely meant the monastery had abandoned its arrangement with the absent Arend van Frahan. Anxiety crept back into Christiana's guts at the thought of having to leave the apartment to secure work. She began to vomit after every meal, until finally she gave up trying to eat at all. It reminded her of the previous winter.

“I'm dying,” she told Elsa.

Chapter 19

Clara Tanner shed her mortal loop three days after the physician left the village. While the rest of her neighbors prayed over the body in the churchyard, Christiana was

alone and abed, pondering her own imminent death. Would it be so bad? She was very tired, and Evrard had taught her that she would be with God, like her baby sibling and her mother. Would that baby still be an infant when she saw it or would it be two years old? She pictured it both ways, and her mind settled on an image of a little boy, a toddler, wandering around in lush grass by the edge of a river, smiling and picking flowers. She began to visualize her mother welcoming her with open arms, and she relaxed into sleep. Then she floated above her mother curled up in the very bed Christiana had just occupied. Suddenly, Mary began to moan and writhe, and her daughter drifted toward her to hold her hand and give comfort. But when Mary rolled over, Christiana saw her own face in place of her mother's and noticed the blood flowing from between her legs.

Christiana jolted upright in bed, fully awake. The confusing dream, so vivid, was still with her. The weak winter light had shifted slightly, and she wondered how long she'd been asleep. Warmth from the ovens below filled the room. Frantically she pulled at the comforter to examine the pallet. There was no blood. While she sat unmoving, realization dawned on her. There hadn't been blood since before the attack. She wasn't dying. She was pregnant.

The townsfolk, about fifty in all, had assembled to pay their respects to the Tanners. As they returned to their homes and places of business, they noticed the pale figure of a barefoot young woman standing on the top step of the apartment above their bakery, clad only in a sullied shift that billowed in the March wind. Her colorless hair coiled and twisted about her head in the bluster. As they approached, they saw it was Christiana van Frahan, whom no one had seen for quite some time. In fact, none could

remember having met her in months. It was as if she were a ghost resurrected to witness Clara Tanner's burial. Mutely staring out towards the churchyard, she seemed not to notice them, and an eerie feeling overspread the group. No one spoke or acknowledged to each other the specter, but when they began their days again, a strange mood pervaded. The troubled humor suffused everyone in Frahan for some time, and there was more prayer than usual—for the strange wraith they'd seen on the landing, for salvation from the string of calamities that had befallen them recently, for a savior to rise from the streets.

Chapter 20

That evening, Madam Baker knocked on the door. She greeted the girls timidly, almost guiltily.

"Christi," she said, taking the girl's hands, "Jan and Berte are expecting the baby soon." There was a pause, but Christiana knew what came next. "We are too crowded below, and we need this apartment for Jan's family. We are loathe to cast you out." She spoke only to Christi, looking piercingly into her eyes. "But we see no alternative than to ask you to take your leave of the quarters. We fear that your father—"

"...may never return. I know, and I thank you for your extended generosity." Christiana took a deep breath. "When would you like us out?" She glanced at Elsa, who only stared into the fire.

"Well, if you can pay for April, you can stay until the end of that month. It will be warmer then, and perhaps you can find work at Beau Sejour or in Rochehaut. Baker will

talk to the customers on your behalf if you'd like. So many pilgrims still pass through looking for Hildegarde that we get news from far and wide. We might be able to help you find a position."

"No, thank you. We will make our own way. You have done so much for me already." And then the conversation was over. Madam Baker straightened her shoulders and smiled with the business done. Elsa had by now counted out the coins needed for April's rent. There were only two long crosses left on the table.

Christiana did not want to live. If her father returned and she had to admit she was pregnant or if he never returned and she became a homeless girl fending for herself and her infant out in the world—these were impossibilities. She considered climbing the steep rocks behind Frahan and hurling herself into the Semois far below, but immediately reviled the thought. She did not know how she would live, but she most certainly did *not* want to die. Despite two contemptible men and their choices, she deserved a life. She was angry again, but this time, the ire she felt was a spark. As she sat clenching and unclenching her jaw, the spark became a flame. She squinted her eyes, trying to discern an elusive solution in the darkness of their dilemma. Abruptly, her imagination lit upon a possibility.

Without discussing it with Elsa, she took out one of the last empty pages from the psalter and penned a letter to the priest, trying to use the credible, formal language she'd heard in town decrees or read in the Bible: *I, Christiana, daughter of Arend van Frahan, beseech by humble petition and desiring not feignedly but in truth to be removed to a*

better life. I wish to vow myself solemnly to perpetual chastity and be shut in the Sint Sebastian anchorhold wherein I can be enabled to serve Almighty God and the parishioners worthily and earnestly. Given at Frahan, Liege, the eleventh day of March, the year our Lord 1300.

Slipping the letter back into the psalter, she began to consider the consequences of this resolution. She would never have to go outside again, except for the day of her enclosure. When she had forced herself to step out onto the landing after she'd realized she was pregnant, it had disoriented and paralyzed her. Being sheltered would bring relief from that constant fear.

Although she wasn't a religious girl, she knew she could make others believe in her piety. Hadn't she attended Mass almost daily until the end of December? Of course, it had been to trace the letters of the Bible with her eyes and fingers and match the words to the Latin she heard from the priest, but no one suspected except maybe Father Villenc himself. The neighbors would not be shocked by her choice. Among the villagers, it had been a foregone conclusion that Evrard would become a member of the clergy, and his sister had prayed with him in public so often, an outsider would not suspect that Christiana was less devout than her brother.

Her brother! Surely he could intercede on her behalf. She took another parchment from the dwindling pile and composed a second letter. She would not lie, exactly, but she would omit parts of the story to convince him of her earnest decision.

The decision would exempt her from having to leave her home town and her friends. She would always have safety and warmth and a full belly. She could play games with Elsa, toy with the cat, read, write, and draw. Her father could no longer dangle

before her a repugnant life. Perhaps most importantly, the anchorhold would conceal her secret. The rape, and its accompanying shame, could remain hidden. She took out the letter written to the priest and perused it. Her choice was made. However, events would have to unfold quickly for her scheme to go undiscovered. If the villagers found she was using the anchorhold as a refuge, she would be abhorrent to them all.

Chapter 21

“One of the dairy cows died unexpectedly last night, and two more are ill,” Elsa announced upon her return that afternoon. Bouncing on her toes, shiny-faced, with her hands hidden behind her, Christiana impatiently waited for her friend’s attention. Elsa, preoccupied with gutting a hare on the hearth, continued, “A group of people went to the priest, begging him for counsel this morning after they discovered the dead cow. He is equipped to manage Mass, not the masses.” She laughed at her own joke as she prepared supper. “That was always Hildegarde’s purview.”

Christiana could not wait any longer and removed the letter from behind her back. She read, “I, Christiana, daughter of Arend van Frahan...” When she was done, her friend sat with her mouth agape until Christiana asked her formally to be her handmaiden in the venture.

“But you’ll have to be inside for the rest of your life.”

“When was the last time I went out, Elsa? I’m anxious when I’m outside now. I don’t know why, exactly.” This was the first lie proffered to obtain what she wanted. For

now, more than anything, this was what she wanted. The anchorhold, the thick stone walls as protection against—everything. “This is a fine answer to our dilemma.”

This particular solution had obviously never occurred to her friend, and it made Christiana proud that she’d worked it out herself. Christiana could clearly read on Elsa’s face that this resolution might be unacceptable. Everyone respected the anchoress position as one of intense holiness, and although Christiana was spiritual, her friend knew she was not devout. For several moments, Christiana watched Elsa’s visage project a struggle to reconcile prescribed piety with their need to be creative in dire circumstances.

“Well, things wouldn’t really change all that much,” she supposed.

“True. We could still play games.”

“Just through the hidey-door.” Elsa smiled.

“Pepper could live in there with me.”

“And you could draw and write.”

“And you could still cook from the game we catch in the traps for our meals,” Christi said, pointing at the pot hanging over the fire.

“Oh, you don’t know how generous people can be when they think you’re the reason their boil went away or their baby didn’t die,” replied Elsa. “We often went weeks without my having to cook much at all because the parishioners brought food as a way of thanking the anchoress for her prayers and attention. We ate well. We’ll eat well,” she said, evidently warming to the idea of going back to the anchorhold. “I’ll bring this letter to Father Villenc tomorrow. We’ll see what he has to say.”

Christiana’s conscience pricked her. She was not giving her friend the full story, nor would she, until she needed to, which would be around harvest time if the baby didn’t

arrive early. She did not know what to do about the secret just now, and she realized that even if she were outside the anchorhold during the baby's birth, she would carry the same amount of worry as inside the cell. She decided to free herself from that fear and concentrate on the obstacle that currently faced her, and that was the priest.

She knew he doubted her piety. This was palpable from his dubious looks during Mass. However, she also knew from the villagers' entreaties that they were eager for an anchoress, and she, ironically, might just be the answer to *his* problem.

The next complication would be her father, if he returned. The girls discussed this at length as they ate. He might have a betrothal and expect her to honor his commitment, although an anchoress would be a more highly-respected position for his daughter than simply a wife. Her father, though, was unpredictable in everything, and he was not pious in any way that she could remember. His blessing might be hard-won. Better, perhaps he would not return until she was already entombed. But mayhap the Church would not approve her status until her father acquiesced. Here, she hoped, Evrard would be an ally.

"Elsa, I have a letter for my brother, as well. What do you think is the best way to get it to him?"

"After I deliver this one to Father Villenc tomorrow, I will walk down to Beau Sejour and ask for them to give it to Brother Bernart when he returns to trade ale...unless you want me to hand deliver it to the abbey myself." Emphatically, Christi nodded, knowing that time might be the final obstacle in this real-life chess match.

Chapter 22

Elsa conveyed the correspondence the next morning and then went about town sharing a rumor that Frahan was to receive a new anchoress.

“Madam Tanner actually dropped to her knees and thanked God Almighty for the news!” Elsa laughed. “Before nightfall, Villenc will be overrun by his flock. If he was considering *not* penning a letter to the bishop on your behalf, he shan’t be able to follow that course now.”

“Will the priest visit?”

“Perhaps. But he might summon you to the rectory or church instead,” Elsa replied. Christiana detested the thought of traipsing about the village. Thankfully, it was in the opposite direction of the fields. It was the walk she should have made weeks ago on New Year’s Eve.

In anticipation of a visit from the priest, Christiana scrubbed poverty from their walls and floors and clothes, tidied the hanging herbs and crockery, and added candles and homemade crosses, which were the bishops from the chess set, to the altar. She decided that even if the priest did not call, the apartment would be spectacularly clean for Jan and Berte. While Elsa hiked to Rochehaut Abbey with Evrard’s letter, Christiana opened the psalter and began in earnest to do her supplications there, praying for the outcome she was attempting to manipulate.

About two weeks before Easter, warm air crept down from Rochehaut into Frahan and Christi let the fire die out. Elsa declared she would fetch fresh water from the river

for washing just as the sun was about to set and out she went, in spite of her friend's concern for her safety. Christiana knelt at her makeshift altar when heavy footfalls started rapidly up the stairs and the door swung open. In the dim light, she could not see who stood in the opening, but her terror gave her some options. But instead of her attacker, her father, or the priest, in walked Madam Baker.

"I—I'm sorry to barge in, Christiana," she said, simultaneously distressed by something outside the room and confused by what she saw in it. "We're worried because Berte's fallen ill. I'm looking for Eiki. Jan thought he might be here. I want to send him for chamomile to ease her suffering and stay the baby."

Christiana decided to attempt the role of comforter to this woman who'd given her such succor. "Eiki is not here, but I believe God has sent you to me this night," Christiana said calmly, remembering Hildegard's soothing words in response to her own anguish. "Let's pray together." And so they did, murmuring quietly by candlelight.

It was a brief prayer. They had gotten through one Hail Mary when they heard Eiki yell from below, "Ma? Ma! I went to the apothecary to get some comfrey for Berte. I'm back. Jan said you went upstairs looking for me. You can come down now. Hi, Christi!" Relief flooded Madam Baker's face and she hugged Christiana. She threw a look back over her shoulder as she left the room. In her clean, white shift and with a smiling face brightened by the candle's glow, Christiana looked like an angel on earth, something the baker's wife would repeat all the next day when Berte's fever had broken and the baby still wiggled in her belly.

Chapter 23

Several days later, the bishop's oily suffragan stepped out of an unremarkable litter, remembering his last visit to this blinkered little village. Hildegarde's driver had died and almost ruined the event. Now Hildegarde was dead, and a young woman, often the worst candidate for an anchorhold, had petitioned the Church to allow her to be entombed. The bishop, ever intrigued by a very young aspirant, had sent him, Antone de Lul, to assess the petitioner, thirteen-year-old Christiana van Frahan.

He found it helpful in these cases to secret his arrival, sweep the area rapidly to avoid chatter of his quest, and interview the villagers first before moving on to the woman herself and finally the priest. Father Villenc would be almost an afterthought in the whole proceedings, for Antone would by then have made up his mind to approve or disapprove the new anchoress. He discovered the most valuable information when he was simply posing as an inquisitive visitor rather than the bishop's appointee, and the peasants' candid gen always allowed him to determine if the petitioner desired the anchorhold with veracity or if she were simply trying to escape some outward prosecution like an unwanted marriage or an abusive husband.

Antone began his investigation at the inn, since he was in need of refreshment anyway. The suffragan made himself comfortable at the largest table, with only a few empty seats between him and two other men who, based on their raiment and familiarity, were obviously townsfolk. He ordered a jug of ale and offered to replenish their drinks. They heartily accepted and immediately turned to include him in conversation.

“Strange to the village?” asked the taller man, looking at Antone’s clothing, his own soaked through with something that smelled of mud.

“I am,” Antone replied after a robust swallow. “I’m here to spread the word of the Jubilee decreed by our good Pope Bonafice VIII. But I can’t spread the word if my throat is too parched to speak.” He smiled, and the two others laughed.

“Now that you’ve had a draught, tell us about this Jubilee,” said the other.

Antone began his studied speech. “The Pope has declared this year of our Lord 1300 one of great remissions of sins which can be obtained by traveling to the city of Rome. In fact, he will pardon most full all sins if one is truly penitent and visits the basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul.” Antone neglected to mention the papal bull’s requirement to visit each cathedral at least once a day for fifteen days. Rome was a stretch for these two workers anyway, and he wasn’t truly in Frahan to discuss the Jubilee. He dropped the bait. “But I understand you’re to get a new anchorite here anyway. You may not need to travel so many miles to arrest your sins.”

“We’ll be grateful to have a recluse praying for our souls again. We just do not yet know who she’ll be.” They always assumed the anchorite would be a female, and the numbers bore out their suppositions.

“Well, I can divulge that information because I’ve just come from the priest who is informed. He said...” Here Antone tapped his temple, faking an attempt to recall the name. “He said her name was ‘Christiana,’ I believe.”

Both men’s eyes grew wide. The villagers’ budding desire for a new anchoress, cultivated by Elsa’s chin wagging, blossomed on that bench in Beau Sejour. One fellow related the story of Clara Tanner’s burial and how Christiana had floated above the

ceremony like a ghost. This was an outlandish yarn, but crofters were inclined to embroider the truth. The other man, who was a fisherman by trade, said he often saw the girl by the river, lying prostrate and talking to God out loud. This account seemed more plausible than the first. He needed to dig further, and fast, so he left the near-empty jug with his two new acquaintances and advanced on the village.

He stopped next at the mill, where he met old Tanner. Antone repeated his charade about the Jubilee and the yeoman bit.

“Christiana and her older brother Evrard were wont to pray just about anywhere and everywhere in the village,” he related. “Would kneel down before a moving horse if it was when God spoke to them.” The suffragan bishop stowed this information and moved on.

Other villagers waiting in a queue at the mill confirmed Tanner’s assertion and explained that Evrard had already donned the cloth at Rochehaut Abbey. Next, Antone stopped at the butcher, who alleged that everyone in town, except those in Christiana’s household, had been afflicted with an illness the previous year. The butcher’s mother claimed to have seen Christiana’s stigmata one day last summer, blood coursing from her hands and side as she walked peacefully down the road. The mason, who’d stopped at the butchery to purchase, said, “I’ve not seen the girl since her brother left for the monastery. Been praying in her quarters above the bakery day and night, it seems.”

That afternoon, he arrived at St. Honore, where the baker and his wife alleged that only a few days prior, Christiana had cured their Berte of a ferocious malady destined to take her and their grandchild to the grave. “Had it not been for her prayers...” Madam Baker’s emotion would not let her finish the sentence. Eiki had heard this story a number

of times already. But this stranger's open-mouthed hunger for information about his Christiana made Eiki's sight more clear. He exited discreetly with two loaves of bread and soundlessly climbed the stairs to Christi's quarters.

"Somebody's downstairs asking about you, Christi" was all he had to say.

Without discussion, Elsa and Christiana sprang into action. The prospective anchoress ran her fingers through her messy hair, plaited it, and splashed water on her face to sharpen her wits. Then she removed her secular illustrations from the psalter and stuffed them under the straw mattress. She straightened the book in the center of the altar and arranged the cross-shaped chess pieces neatly beside it. Elsa fluffed the comforter over the pallet and lit the candles. She took the bread from Eiki's hands and shooed him away. His brow furrowed, but he had the sense to see that this, whatever *this* was, held some importance for his friends. As he closed the door gently behind him, he saw Christiana drop to her knees in prayer.

After finishing a slab of warm, crusty bread smeared with sweet butter, better than any he'd tasted since Bouillon, Antone knocked on Christiana's door. If the girl's conduct corroborated the peasants' tales even slightly, this one would be the finest candidate of the nine he'd assessed in as many years. He felt a triumph growing within him, for installing an efficacious anchorite brought renown to the Church and the officials responsible for the appointment. The only other concern he had was the bishop's parting words: "Be sure to establish that there is adequate financial support to sustain this woman. She is young, and the Church will not be fiscally responsible." The girl would have to possess some means, as Frahan's previous anchoress had in selling her fine lace.

A hearty maid answered the knock, and Antone thought she hadn't a hair's resemblance to an "angel on earth" as the baker's wife had proclaimed. But then the door swung open further, and Antone beheld an affirming sight. Kneeling before a homemade altar, a slight young tow-headed woman in a loose, white shift confirmed the villagers' accounts of the would-be anchoress. She turned her intense blue eyes on him, and the holiness therein beseeched him so that his skeptical core melted. He did not see Elsa slip out the door nor hear Christiana's heart banging the inside of her chest like a wild animal newly caged.

Christiana's guts sloshed apprehensively as the hook-nosed Antone de Lul introduced himself and dragged the small bench beside her. She'd not been this close to a man since the time of the attack. Mightily, she tried not to faint away. She had been planning what she would do and say when confronted with the impediments to the anchorhold, so she concentrated on that. Believing as much honesty as possible would gain her an advantage, she donned a neutral face, not too eager, not too solemn. It was her mask as the interview began.

"Are you Christiana van Frahan?" asked the suffragan.

"Yes, sir, I am," she replied passively.

"Where are your mother and father?"

"My mother died in childbirth years ago. My father Arend is a merchant and has been traveling for many months."

"You are on your own?" Christiana nodded. "How have you survived?"

“My servant and I live modestly on the coins my father left behind and the transactions he’s arranged here in the village.” She was worried that her time as a *goudalier* wouldn’t be quite pious enough for this man, so she did not mention it. Antone was more concerned that she relied on her father’s funds, for the bishop would not consent to be her benefactor, only her sponsor. He rose and began to wander about the room, looking out the window, inspecting the sleeping pallet, circling back toward the altar as the girl observed his movements from the hearth.

“Are you wed?”

“No.”

“Are you betrothed?”

“No.” These were precarious questions.

“Does your request to be sealed in the anchorhold arise from some malevolent condition outside it?”

“No.”

“Do you possess the mental faculties to withstand the stressors sure to arise from living a solitary life?”

“I believe I do, yes.”

“Do you understand that enclosure is permanent? And entreaties for a change in status will not be entertained by your bishop, Hugues of Chalon?”

“Yes.” The questions had thankfully taken an innocuous turn.

“Do you have servants aligned?”

“Yes. One who is my servant now and who was also Hildegarde’s maiden before. Her name is Elsa. You met her when you arrived.” Antone nodded his approval.

“If you are installed at Sint Sebastian’s, what do you intend to do to support yourself and your handmaiden?” Then his eyes found the psalter. Christi watched him flip the pages curiously, and before she could answer the first question, he asked, “How did you come to possess this book?”

“My father, knowing our piety, brought it back with him from France many years ago. I’m not certain of its origin, but I am enamored of it.” She stood and moved to the psalter. “I have trained myself to write and illuminate.” Deliberately, she proceeded to her depiction of the anchorhold. “Many of the pages are in my hand.”

Incredulously, he asked, “You can read and write?”

“Yes, Monsieur de Lul. Perhaps that is how I can sustain myself in the hermitage.” She went back to the hearth, and sat again, looking expectantly at her disarmed visitor.

There were always Bibles and scripture to be copied for the wealthy. Usually this was a monk’s duty, but Christiana’s handwriting and images were more beautiful even than the original author’s. Her work would be in demand. Indeed, this would be an excellent occupation for the new anchoress. He could stock her anchorhold with all the tools necessary for this endeavor—quills, vellum, ink pots, and candles—and he would charge the Liege elite extravagant sums to own her manuscripts. Yes, he thought as he sat down beside her, he would approve her petition. Only his curiosity about the villagers’ fabrications remained.

“Christiana, your neighbors have told me tales of your extreme piety and your mysticism.” He decided to address the most holy allegation. “One purported you had the stigmata, a tremendous assertion. What have you to say to this?”

“Sir, in truth, I have never been graced with stigmata.” She couldn’t imagine why anyone she knew would conspire to construct such a lie. “It is true that I pray often...” She pointed to her altar. “...and I dream of Mary who enlightens me.” Here, she let the suffragan believe what he wanted. “My brother, now a monk at Rochehaut Abbey, taught me that even when times seem bleak, our faith in our Lord can shepherd us through our suffering. Perhaps the villagers are projecting onto me their need for redemption. I hope, as their anchoress, that I can bring them some comfort, as Hildegard did before me.” Most of this speech she’d practiced over and over in her mind for days. Like arrows hitting their target, Christiana watched her words convince this baleful man of her sincerity. He slapped his knees, took a deep breath, and rose.

“Your desire to serve is admirable. I foresee no impediments to your request for enclosure.”

Christiana stood at her window watching Antone de Lul’s back as he hiked up the hill towards the church. As she breathed a sigh of relief, she was surprised to sense the quickening. She placed a hand on her belly and rubbed the spot where she’d felt the flutter. The door opened behind her. She dropped her hand and turned to tell Elsa about the successful interrogation. Instead, her father stood like a behemoth on the landing.

Chapter 24

“God’s nails!” he bellowed. “What is happening here?” He strode over to the crude altar and flicked a hand-carved cross onto the floor. “What are you playing at, Christiana?” He stood over her menacingly. Just a moment before, she’d been imagining

herself safely inside the walls of the anchorhold. Then Fortune's wheel had turned and now here she was, cut into several pieces, like a loaf of bread. One part of her wanted to fight with her father, to scream and rage against the unjust constraints of being a woman. Another portion sought to explain her decision, to use logic and calm reason to persuade her father that the anchorhold was the best choice, as she had done in the letter to her brother. Still another slice of her spirit, new and cunning and strident, decided to gamble that the villagers would unwittingly work for her before she went to work for them. Staying her tongue, she knelt and bent her head, praying that her neighbors' words would be the ones to turn the wheel again in her favor. The back of her neck prickled, acutely vulnerable to Arend's aggression.

Instead of a blow, there was an exasperated grumble. Her piety, or perhaps it was just exhaustion after his long trip, diffused his anger, and he collapsed onto the bed. Christiana continued her prayers, and within just a few moments, her father was asleep. She briefly entertained stabbing him in the heart with the knife, but then she would be going to the gallows instead of to church, and she desperately wanted to live her own life, abjectly woeful as it presently seemed.

When he woke later, she was chastely stewing pigeon for supper and keeping her eyes downcast. This deferential treatment was unfamiliar. She was not giving off her routine ripples of hatred, and he did not know how to react to this behavior. So he ate the bird and promptly exited the apartment, making a line straight to Beau Sejour.

While he sat admiring the tavern's sturdy frame and wattle walls and drinking the monks' ale he'd once introduced to this insufferably remote little village, four others entered the inn. They slapped him on the back in home-coming welcome. As the night

progressed, a minstrel began playing his lute, and neighbors streamed in and out, repeating the goings-on of the past three months and toasting his daughter. By the end of the night, he was ape-drunk, laughing and singing with the butcher and Ghoris Deckere. He stumbled home just before Sint Sebastian's bells rang matins.

When Arend awakened mid-morning with an axed skull, the priest, a fastidiously-attired gentleman with slippery hair, and his son all stood around the bed. He leaned over the piss bucket and retched, wiped his mouth with a filthy shirtsleeve, and asked, "Who the fuck-all is this?"

Evrard said calmly, "Father Villenc and Bishop Suffragan Antone de Lul have come to confer with you over a matter of great importance to the Church." Evrard glanced at his sister who was bowed over the psalter, as if shielding it from the unexpected assemblage in the room.

"We have something to discuss with you regarding your daughter, sir," said the greasy stranger, who Arend assumed was de Lul. "Before you returned to Frahan, I investigated Christiana, who I have determined is an excellent candidate for the hermitage. I have drafted a letter of divine permission, to be sealed by the bishop with your accord." He unfurled a sheet of vellum and read, "The petition lately exhibited to us by the Godly Christiana van Frahan sets forth that, whereas she desires fulfilment of a better life to remove herself, and spend in service of God and in all sanctity and chastity, alongside the Sint Sebastian Church, striving with all her heart to endure henceforth perpetual enclosure; having therefore diligently made enquiry into her life and conversation of the said Christiana and all her things right and necessary herein; and

because by this enquiry we have found no cause for deciding that the said Christiana should not be permitted to be enclosed there; we, observing the praiseworthy purpose of the aforesaid Christiana and with the consent also of Villenc, the present Rector of the church, and the parishioners thereof, are pleased to grant the said Christiana our consent in this matter, that she may be enclosed in the anchorhold, thus laid aside from public and worldly sights, she may be enabled to serve God more freely in every way, and having resisted all opportunity for wantonness may keep her heart undefiled by the world.” Bishop Greasy paused and looked up from the scroll expectantly. Arend made no sign that he had heard or understood what had been read to him. Evrard closed his eyes and took a deep, palliative breath.

Father Villenc added, “As you can see, we need you to verify that there is no cause for deciding that Christiana is unworthy of the role of anchoress.” Arend’s head was splitting, but all the hazy stories about his daughter were beginning to resurface from the night before. “To attach our seal hereto, we need your affirmation.”

Ignoring the men, Arend van Frahan propped himself up on his elbow, and he and his daughter looked squarely at each other for the first time since his return. Everyone else in the room was silent, waiting. None could imagine what passed between the two of them. Christiana saw years of struggle and a last hurdle to finally have a choice of her own. Rather than shoot her customary daggers, she conducted imploring love, and that is how Arend came to see his wife Mary staring back at him.

“No,” Arend said.

The three men looked to him questioningly, but Christiana staunchly held her father’s gaze.

“No,” he repeated, without breaking eye contact with her. “There is no cause to believe my daughter is unworthy.”

Visibly relieved for their own individual reasons, Father Villenc and Antone de Lul bustled about using Christiana’s quill and ink to add the last words to the bishop’s consent. Evrard hurried to Christiana’s side and folded her hands in his in prayer. His sister smiled nostalgically, recalling a night several years ago when she had conspired to get her hands on the psalter. This ploy had bought her so much more than a book, and she willed herself to stifle a satisfied smile. The suffragan read aloud, “In witness whereof we have caused our seal to be attached hereto. Given at Frahan, Liege, the twenty-sixth day of March, in the year of our Lord 1300.” He folded the parchment, melted a small red beeswax pellet over the candle flame, and sealed the decree. The baby squirmed low in her abdomen. Arend threw his head back onto the bed and promptly fell asleep.

Part III

Chapter 25

The entombment was scheduled for Good Friday, the sixteenth of April. Before he'd left the village to make the three-day return trek to Bouillon to deliver the official petition to the bishop, Antone de Lul instructed Christiana on the day's events and the Church's expectations. He was not certain if he'd be chosen to administer last rites or if the bishop himself would travel to their little village to perform the ritual. He seemed to be quite concerned about that point, but it did not much interest Christiana. Instead, although she understood the role she'd play in the ceremonies, three worries plagued her. First, she was anxious about being out in the street. She hadn't stepped outside since she realized she was with child. Second, her pregnancy might be discovered before her enclosure. Three weeks was a long time to cover her burgeoning belly. Third, she would have to give confession on Holy Thursday. Even though she didn't necessarily believe in the sanctity of the anchorhold in the same way the Church did, she imagined the state of her soul in peril. When she asked if Evrard could be her confessor, she was not assured by de Lul's response, "Perhaps."

Elsa had returned to Sint Sebastian's to prepare for Christiana's arrival, and Evrard had returned to Rochehaut Abbey until the enclosure ceremony. Worse, her father had learned of the arrangement she'd made with the Bakers concluding their lease at the end of the month and seemed angry at no one in particular but everyone in general. Because she was loathe to leave the room, she could not escape his huffing and puffing

and slamming about the apartment, his drunk comings and goings, or his calculated neglect. She spent much of the time hunched over her makeshift altar, which helped her avoid the duties she'd suffered before he had embarked on his last expedition.

One evening while Arend made merry at Beau Sejour, Eiki came to visit. It was the first time they'd been alone since before the suffragan's visit. Clearly, he had been waiting patiently to ask his questions.

"Christi, how are you going to stay inside for the rest of your life?" he asked incredulously. "You love to float on the Semois and hike to Rochehaut."

Christiana answered honestly, "I'll be able to see the river from the anchorhold. The outward window faces north behind the church, as you know, and I'll witness the change of the seasons and the fog on the water and the swans and ducks paddling upstream. And the reason I loved to climb to Rochehaut was to look down on Frahan like God does from Heaven. Now I can tend to the village with my prayers and counsel." She heard the pleading quality in her voice and tried to squash it as she would a spider. "It is a noble, honest way to spend a life, Eiki."

"Forgive me, Christi, but there's something I don't believe about it. I'm your friend. We've always known each other." He looked at her piercingly, in that Baker way, and she realized he was expecting her to tell him the truth. This was a worry she hadn't anticipated. Eiki had always been her malleable childhood ally and champion in all manner of things. But this conversation suddenly made their friendship tangible, like a solid stone under soft moss. She could trust him, she knew, in a way she could not trust even Elsa. The whole story sat on her lips—a bird about to take flight—and her rapid heartbeat bounced the branch upon which candor sat.

“If I’m honest with myself,” she finally whispered conspiratorially, “part of the reason I want to become anchoress is so that I don’t have to honor the betrothal my father is brewing in Bruges.” It was evident from his widened eyes Eiki hadn’t heard of the arrangement. How could he have? He nodded sagely to show he understood and then smiled at her admission. This small piece of the truth seemed enough to satisfy him, and he brought his index finger to his lips to show he’d keep her secret. *If he only knew the entirety of it, how would he feel about me?* she wondered. Christiana looked back at his dear, open face and felt a surge of affection. Impulsively, she hugged him and next asked for a favor.

“Of course,” he replied in an instant.

“Would you take my blanket? One rule is that I’m not to have comforts in the anchorhold. At some time after I’m installed, you could come to Elsa with bread...”

“Bread and bedspread,” he teased.

“Thank you, Eiki.” She grinned. “Thank you.”

Christiana wrote a brief, benign letter to Evrard, asking if he would hear her confession on Holy Thursday. He would have to petition de Lul or Bishop Hugues, but she hoped whichever cleric came to do the rite of enclosure would see the special quality of a brother hearing his own sister’s confession. The damage the revelations might do to her brother’s spirit seemed a small price to pay for her own soul to remain intact.

“Father, would you bring this letter to Beau Sejour with you tonight? It is for Evrard. With all the ale flowing, I know the inn is constantly in contact with the abbey.” Arend grunted, took the vellum, and stuffed it in his pocket. Christiana would have to

trust that he'd deliver the message.

The bishop himself and his entourage arrived in a grand, gilded litter, the likes of which the people of Frahan had never seen. Four Clydesdales struggled to bring the gliding room down the steep hill from Rochehaut. Women and children hurried from their houses and men from the fields to witness the pageantry. The carriage was followed by two carts hauling trunks whose contents would be used to costume the retinue during their three day visit culminating in the new anchoress being entombed in the hermitage attached to Sint Sebastian. Meanwhile, beside the mill, Beau Sejour, the business that would profit from pilgrims and peasants visiting Christiana, would host the party, and this is where they alighted. The horses, realizing they were at the end of their journey, stamped and nudged one another.

Fat pink hands parted red velvet, and the curtains' gold tassels swayed. The bishop blinked his beady eyes at the brightness he encountered exiting the litter, adjusting the miter on his head as he reached to one of his men for help descending. With a flourish, the guards, dressed in leather armor and breast plates, dismounted, handed reins to the stable boy, and entered the inn.

Of course, Elsa had been a spectator, and Christiana learned all the details that afternoon. The fleshy bishop had seemed shocked by his countrified surroundings, but began to demand of the village immediately. The Bakers were commissioned for three times their normal amount of bread, and the afternoon was punctuated by intermittent squealing of the animals being slaughtered for the visitors' meals. From her window, Christiana saw Colin walk toward the tavern with a string full of trout. He looked up,

pointed at his haul, and gave her an appreciative wave. As she smiled and waved back, it began to dawn on her that she held great sway here, for her entombment would elicit a level of prosperity her neighbors had not enjoyed since Hildegarde's tenure. Her job would be to fill souls and, unwittingly, pockets. The inherent power went briefly to her head, and she imagined great men and women from far and wide coming to her window for counsel.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Elsa jumped up to answer it while Christiana arranged herself beside her altar.

"Good afternoon, anchoress," the elderly bishop said with a warm smile that made his eyes disappear into his chubby cheeks. He removed his miter, which would have been crushed by the low ceiling, and passed it to the guard who stood outside on the landing.

"Good afternoon, Bishop Hugues," Christiana replied with a polite curtsy, head held at a deferential angle with her own eyes downcast. In a rustle of incense-infused fabric, he came and kissed her on both cheeks. It was an earnest gesture that both surprised and charmed her. Despite his opulent robes, this gentleman reminded her of a kindly village elder, and she was instilled with an unexpected confidence. If she could be beside him, or in front of or behind him, she felt she could muster the courage to be outside for the short walk to the church.

"Suffragan Bishop Antone de Lul speaks very highly of your virtues. That you are spiritually committed and that you want to serve your community. That you can read, write, and draw beautifully." The old man looked approvingly around the plain room, taking in the altar, the hand-crafted crosses, the empty sleeping pallet. The ascetic quality pleased him. "Tomorrow, we'll begin preparations for the Rite of Enclosure with your

confession, fasting and vigil, but I wanted to come meet you myself today. I understand you are more comfortable staying in your own home?" The girl nodded. "And that is just as well for someone about to be cloistered. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you in private. Mystery makes a more impressive spectacle for those who will surely come to gawk at this rare ceremony." Apparently, he hadn't considered that Elsa was still in the room. If he wanted something to remain confidential, she was perhaps the worst person in Frahan to speak in front of. Christiana stifled a smile and refused to look at her friend who'd retreated to the darkest corner. He sat his considerable bulk on the bench. Her eyes could not be pulled from his scarlet robes and his white hair flowing over his shoulders like water over a rock. He was so clean. He reminded her of those kings she'd seen illuminated in the psalter.

"Do you understand the severity of the lifestyle you're about to undertake, Sister?"

"I do, Your Excellency." She met his eye as she answered, using the respectful term as de Lul had coached her.

"Incarcerated, your will shall undoubtedly be tested." She closed her eyes and nodded. "What do you intend to do when the inevitable madness strikes you?"

Christiana hadn't thought much about it. She answered honestly, "I intend to pray."

"Spoken like a true anchorite! You'll begin your fast tonight at compline, and tomorrow morning I'll hear your confession at the church." Here was her opportunity to dispel one of her worries.

“Bishop Hugues, may I humbly request that Brother Evrard from Rochehaut Abbey be my confessor tomorrow? He is my blood brother and has had the most influence on my piety. It would mean a great deal to us both if you would consent to it.”

“Well, itinerant mendicants do travel about giving absolution, although I daresay the Church frowns upon it generally. However, this is a very special observance, so yes, I will give my blessing. I’ll dispatch Father Villenc’s penitential to the abbey so that your brother can review it before morning.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Now, on another matter. May I see this psalter I’ve heard so much about?” She went to her altar and lifted its bulk into her arms. Placing it in his lap, she imagined herself handing over a baby to its grandfather. He flipped through the pages, approved of its contents as she pointed out her own drafts, and administered a directive. “When you are confined, you must be prepared to support yourself. Suffragan bishop de Lul has made a fine push on your behalf. You will be a scribe for the Church. When you are incarcerated, the Church will expect you to copy other texts. You can design the pages as you see fit, and you’ll be provided with candles, ink, and parchment to complete the tasks. When you’re done, your handmaiden will send a message, through the abbey, to me in Bouillon, and I’ll be sure the book reaches its benefactor. The funds from its sale will sustain you in the anchorhold. I will also appeal to the townsfolk tomorrow, as you’ll see. The first text will already be in in the anchorage waiting for you.”

Christiana acquiesced. What else could she do? The heavy strain of posturing weighed on her, and she rubbed her eyes.

“I see you’re taxed by all this excitement,” said the bishop. “Tomorrow, then.”

Elsa ran to the door and opened it. The guard handed over the miter. Many townspeople, fictitiously employed in pursuits in the street directly below, hailed his departure from Christiana’s apartment, waving and making certain his withdrawal was a notable event.

“Tomorrow,” Christiana replied meekly.

Chapter 26

In the morning, her father was nowhere but her brother arrived with bread and wine and kind words. He spoke to her as she arranged her hair with a borrowed comb and made ready for the day behind the drawn curtain. She felt like a bride, as Berte must have felt last June. She’d washed and dried and chewed mint in anticipation of the long day to come. Elsa had gone ahead with the psalter and had promised to be near the front of the congregation during Mass.

“Christi, are you well?” Evrard didn’t wait for an answer. “You must be hungry. It is just us. Eat.” She did, despite the imposed fast, and touched the tonsure on his head, laughing mirthlessly.

“You’ll hear my confession, Evrard?”

“At the church,” he replied. No sooner had she finished her illicit biscuit and the door opened. It was her father, who had not been home in two days. They looked at him expectantly, and he fumbled for something to say that would matter.

“Mary would have been proud of you,” he said finally, as his children made their way to the door, dismissing him and his awkwardness. Christiana took a deep breath

before her brave sojourn outside. Below, the bishop, his four guards, and everyone she'd known her whole life stood in the road. She caught sight of Eiki and the Bakers at their door, Berte gently bouncing the newborn in her arms above her still-swollen belly. The rosy-cheeked family each smiled stoically and imparted a small wave.

There were prayers and light cheers, and Eiki kept his finger to his lips while Evrard held tight to her hand. Only these things helped her move down the stairs. It seemed that every color, every line on every face, every sound underscored her whole life up until this very moment, so that she could not avoid it. The baby squirmed, and she almost retreated back into her room. When she turned, though, her father stood on the landing at the top of the steps. No escape. The anchoress took another deep breath to settle her nerve and started her feet moving again. This felt both right and wrong at the same time, and there was no stopping it, so she met the bishop and his men and stepped into the dirt of Frahan.

She kept her head down but her eyes swiveled, alert to any danger. The people, more than just her neighbors, laid palms at her feet as if she were Jesus himself. Someone played a viol and dogs barked at the intrusion of visitors. Soon, she was within the safety of the church walls with only her brother, Father Villenc, and the bishop. The crowd outside carried on raucously now that the brief walk had concluded. As the bishop ushered Christi into the confessional, her eyes snagged on his pectoral cross, decorated with red gems. The girl had never seen a jewel, but she assumed these were rubies. Evrard climbed into the other side. She heard the other clergymen's footfalls retreat. The separating door opened, and there was the slatted outline of her brother.

No sound emerged from the confessional, so she began, “Forgive me, Brother Evrard, for I have sinned. I have never before made confession.” Just as she’d mentally practiced her words to convince Antone de Lul of her piety, she had rehearsed this speech while praying at her altar these many days. Perhaps that was what prayer was—the repetitive meditation on one’s own future in the hopes of manifesting those thoughts into reality.

The prepared admission poured out in a whisper. “I lied to the clergy. I am entering the anchorhold feignedly. I sustained an attack on New Year’s Eve in the Tanners’ fields, and I am with child as a result. I am so afraid to be sent off to marry an old man from Bruges without my friends or my maidenhead that I am willing to break the holy bounds of the hermitage to escape my predicament.” She did not offer Elsa up as a conspirator. Instead, she continued, “As I take no vows and intend to serve God and the community in the role of anchoress as it’s intended, I hope that I will be forgiven these transgressions.” They sat without speaking for several minutes, during which time the declaration lifted a millstone off her shoulders. Carrying it this long had made her forget its weight, and now that it was raised she felt elated and buoyant. She added, “I’ve also entertained murderous thoughts about my father...Amen.” Evrard’s silhouette was still visible on the other side of the confessional, but he remained motionless and mute. So much time passed that she began worry that the bishop would suspect something was awry. She opened her own door onto an empty church and made her way to the nave, where she lay prone on the ground before the dais, her arms spread wide and her forehead pressed into the cold stone, as de Lul had instructed.

Eventually, Sint Sebastian's arched wooden doors opened and parishioners began to pour in, murmuring and shuffling to their seats, as she'd heard them do so many times before. Small suppressed gasps escaped some at the sight of her. Christi pictured the ornate altar and painted ceiling above her, with its depiction of Hubert and his famous stag with a crucifix suspended between its antlers. St. Hubert had lain prostrate on the ground on Good Friday, and he, too, had dedicated himself to the Lord. She hoped her confession, despite receiving no penance, would keep her soul as safe as Hubert's certainly must be.

Soon, bodies began to move around her and the Mass started with the bishop speaking loudly in Latin and then Father Villenc taking over the observance. She'd attended enough of his Masses to know by the slight tremor in his voice that he was nervous, and no wonder. Not only was it a high holy day, but this bishop had never been to tiny Sint Sebastian's before, and would never likely be here again. Despite herself, Christiana sent Villenc good thoughts and offered up prayers for a successful service. By all counts, it was just that. As the vespers bell rang the hour of Jesus Christ's death, a hand pressed her arm, and she was given the Eucharist. The priest urged a candle into her hands, motioning for her to light it and then move to the empty seat near the altar beside the bishop. As her neighbors and other worshippers came slowly in a line to receive the Body of Christ, each tossed an interested glance her way, but she did not acknowledge the throng. Rather, she took long, deep breaths and watched the flame move with them. Like a mummer, she played her role, and the acting allowed her to cover her trepidation of what was to come.

The church emptied, and she was left to sit vigil throughout the night. By playing with the dripping candle wax and pressing it between her fingers, she was able to keep herself awake through matins. Different thoughts began to push into her mind randomly one after the other, like an endless line of baby ducks. *Piet has to ring those bells at the right time every day*, she thought. *How does he do it? Elsa's probably asleep right now. I wonder what she's dreaming about. Will Father be at the ceremony tomorrow?* In time, her taper faltered and died, and the anchoress was left to stare at the larger altar candles, radiating heat and light into the church. Evrard sat in the second row, just inside their protective glow, deep in prayer and ignoring her unless she was about to nod off to sleep. Then he would cough or shuffle his feet, still not looking up. *How does he know exactly when to prompt me? It's so dark in the corners of the church. Why am I not scared? My scalp is tingling. And finally, I feel strong.* The feeling did not last long.

By daybreak, Christiana was delirious from lack of sleep and food, but she kept reminding herself that soon it would be over, soon she would be tucked in her keep, snuggled under a blanket, eating an egg from Elsa's skillet. The doors swung open, letting in a bit of light. The bishop came and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. She wanted him to pick her up and carry her.

"It is time," he said placidly, and Christiana was on her feet. She could see her breath as she approached the egress and then what she witnessed next shocked her. Dozens upon dozens of people, peasants and pilgrims, monks and yeomen, noiselessly watched as she descended the church steps and turned right. Had they been outside all night? Was *he* in that sea of faces? The inner strength she'd felt during her vigil faded, and she shook with fear. The bishop, with his spotless miter and smooth crosier, walked

in front, giving her the capacity to take each step, and the priest and Evrard flanked her as they made the next turn around Elsa's quarters. Elsa stood outside her door with Piet and Eiki. Tears leaked from Eiki's eyes and this took her aback as much as the sight of so many people.

It was a wonder to think all of them were here in her honor. For, in their minds, what she did was honorable, and it warranted this pageantry so they could marvel at the gravity of her choice. *What a sacrifice Christiana van Frahan makes today*, she imagined them all thinking. *If they only knew the truth, they would be throwing rotten cabbage at me.*

Outside the anchorhold, the procession stopped, and the bishop, with his hand outstretched over Christiana's head, spoke to the onlookers. "This young woman has been deemed most worthy by the Church authorities and her neighbors," he began as the horde surged to better see and hear, "to function in the role of your anchoress for as long as she lives. Once entombed, she will spend her days in supplication on your behalf, and on behalf of all sinners. Do not forget her when you make tithes or when you make supper." Some in the audience laughed at the bishop's well-timed joke. Others nodded, perhaps considering how much they'd be able to sacrifice from their own tables to help feed Christiana. "Your *mediatrix* becomes a terrestrial angel today. And now," he paused dramatically, "I will ask your anchoress, Christiana van Frahan, to enter her ossuary at the crossroads between Heaven and earth."

Christiana's eyes swept through the crowd. Her father was nowhere to be seen. Even in this fateful moment, anger tried to overwhelm her. She let it give her courage instead. As she turned to face the stone wall, whose side had been opened further to allow

her to enter upright, one woman's weeping began near the river. Others took up the chorus of tears. All Christi wanted was to be in the dark womb of the anchorhold, with her secret shielded from these people. Evrard squeezed her hand once without looking at her, the bishop made the sign of the cross on her forehead, and then she stepped up and into the small room that was her new home. The mason Mattheus began to stack the stones one by one as the bishop initiated last rites.

There was no pallet, so Christiana lay down on the dirt floor and stifled a shriek when something small and furry poked out from under the thin wool blanket. Pepper's purring made her smile in the face of fear. She placed the cat on her chest and listened to the bishop's prayer, heard the neighbors' weeping, felt the baby kick. Then Mattheus mortared the final stone into its place and all was black. In a moment, her sight adjusted to the darkness, and she let her shoulders sink to the floor in relief. Finally, she and her secret were safe.

Chapter 27

Like her father, Christiana had fallen asleep rapidly, undeterred by the dirt floor and short, scratchy blanket. When the tolling woke her later, she guessed it was the compline bell based on the light outside. She would get very used to estimating time in the near future. Right now, she was famished.

Christiana crouched and knocked on the little door between the anchorhold and Elsa's room. Immediately, the door swung open and her friend's face beamed at her.

“I was wondering when you’d wake up!” she said excitedly. “How are you feeling?”

The anchorage floor was about an arm’s length higher than Elsa’s, so Christiana lay down on her stomach to have a better conversation. Elsa sat on her three-legged stool and, through the door, passed two fried eggs and one of Eiki’s traveling loaves.

“I was going to say ‘hungry’! Thank you,” she replied with a full mouth.

Elsa took up the banter while Christi ate. “Your brother left as soon as Mattheus had done his job. Everyone assumed he was overwhelmed with emotion at your sacrifice.”

“He was probably just tired, like I was,” Christi said, wiping her lips with her sleeve, not letting on that her confession might have played a role in his swift departure. “I didn’t see my father.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you expected him to stay in Frahan one minute more than he had to.”

“He could have stayed for the enclosure ceremony,” she replied, despising the whine in her own voice. Elsa answered by pursing her lips in wry skepticism. “Is Bishop Hugues still in the village?”

“Yes, there’s a big feast at Beau Sejour celebrating you.” They smiled at the irony as the anchoress cleaned her plate. “He leaves tomorrow morning. We’re to expect him just after sunup. Before he left, he reminded me of my duties to you, as if I hadn’t been responsible for Hildegard for three years.” She shook her head. “But he said there’s a manuscript in the anchorhold that you’ll be sharing with me?” A quick look around the room confirmed there was a book above her psalter on a writing desk, along with a pile of

vellum sheets, ink, and rushlights. “And Eiki and Piet told me separately that they have some items for you, but I suggested we wait until after the bishop leaves.”

“That was a good idea,” Christi said, placing her plate on the floor between them. “I’m sorry you have to be like a servant to me, Elsa.”

“Christi, it isn’t a bother. I’m sorry you have to stay in there in order to make sure we aren’t homeless.”

“It isn’t a bother.” They both laughed. Christiana’s full belly made her yawn. She shifted to her side and used the crook of her elbow as a pillow. There wouldn’t be much more laying on her stomach. “Thank you for leaving Pepper in here. He helped me when I should have been shaking with fear.”

“I think Pepper is a girl, and I think she’s pregnant.”

Christi looked down at the cat, curled in the shape of the letter C on her blanket. She had the urge to draw him. Her. *We have something in common*, she thought. What she said aloud was, “How did we miss that?”

Elsa shrugged. “I thought he was just getting fat.”

“I’m sorry.” She yawned again. “I have to go back to sleep.”

“Of course. Try to sleep through the night. You have a big day tomorrow,” her friend said sarcastically. They cackled like hens. *Easy laughter between friends is one of life’s true joys*, Christiana thought. She felt so grateful for the bond between them. She wished she could share her secret with Elsa. “Should I keep the door open?”

“Please.” She felt truly safe and at peace for the first time since before her mother died. The heat of the hearth in Elsa’s annex issued through the stone causing Christiana to fall asleep before the spring light faded from the sky.

An utterly black shroud met the anchoress when she next woke. It was as if God had snuffed out all the light, and the darkness was completely disorienting. She felt around for Pepper. The cat was no longer there, so she stood, splayed her hands out before her and took cautious, choppy steps toward the window facing the river. She removed one end of the curtain from its peg and let the cloth hang down. Able to poke her head through the gap in the stones, Christiana looked up at the sky's myriad stars. If the lofty expanse were a black cloak, she imagined a bright Heaven beyond peeking through tiny holes the angels had punctured in it. She breathed in the fresh night air, listened to the rushing of the Semois over its bed of pebbles, and realized she had to relieve herself.

With her eyes adjusted to the limited light, she made her way back across the room—she counted five paces—to the table and grabbed one of the rushlights from a pile there. By reaching her arm as far as she could through the door and into the embers of Elsa's fire, she was able to light it. Elsa's wavering shadow rose and fell with her even breaths. Sweeping the anchorhold with the taper's light, Christi found no waste bucket and began to panic. The urge to piss was strong now that she was aware of it. Then, beside the table in the corner which would be nearest the church itself, she spied a wooden plank with a hole large enough to drop a big river rock through and made a necessary assumption. She squatted over it and surprised herself by saying, "Ahhhhh."

Christiana did not want to wake her friend, so she explored her cell instead. Putting her back against the wall, with the door on her left and the hole in the floor on the right, she retraced her six paces to the window, turned, and put her back against that outer

wall. On her left was the altar with a crucifix hanging above it. The writing table with its angled top sat just to the altar's right. Below the table was a three-legged stool, which she could use to sit and talk to visitors at the waist-high window. Opposite, she could just see the cross-shaped squint, where she would have to stand for Mass. The wall to her right was bare except for a few metal pegs overhead. She put her back against that wall and felt the heat from the chimney seeping through the stone. Though she'd slept by the little hidey-door, this would be the likely place for her pallet because she would stay warm. For the first time, she wondered why there was no bed. She would talk to Elsa about it and about the little privy when her friend awoke.

From here, she counted five paces as she crossed to the writing table. The room was nearly square. On the large tabletop sat her psalter, another, smaller book with the words "guide for anchoresses" across its wooden cover, blank pieces of vellum, ink pots, and quills. Her excitement grew, and, propping the rushlight in its holder, she took a piece of vellum off the top of the pile and began to draw Pepper as the C she'd envisioned earlier.

In a very short time, the illumination was complete, and she congratulated herself for it was done quite well. But it was in the top left corner of the page with lots of space remaining. Not wanting to squander the expensive vellum, she decided to practice her writing which had lately been neglected. Instead of copying a psalm or a page from the guide the bishop had left, she decided to use the C to start her name: "Christiana." She paused, considering what to write next. *They cannot go into the anchorhold, of course* streamed through her mind again and again. The refrain made her feel secure and confident. She continued: "the anchoress at Sint Sebastian's hermitage, was born in the

village of Frahan, Liege, in the spring of the year of Our Lord 1286 to Arend and Mary. Her brother Evrard, four years older, loved to play priest. It was from him that Christiana first learned the calming effect of prayer and the freedom of the written word.” Here, she ran out of room. The light burned low.

The sky had turned a bruised lavender. She pulled the stool to the window and watched the ghostly morning mist creep up from the river through the thick forest on the far bank toward the hilltop and into the cemetery on the near side. Birds trilled, hesitantly at first, and then with more urgency as the firmament blanched. Several cleanly-shorn sheep wandered in the new grass beside the Semois. Christi had never noticed before that the area was enclosed by a fence, and she wondered who owned the small parcel of land on which they grazed. The Tanners would have their livestock on the other end of the village, near their big fields and the mill. One neighbor must have more wealth than she suspected. Soon the foot bridge was in sight, and the fisherman, Colin, impressed her by being already at work, reeling in his breakfast, she supposed. It would be quite some time before the sun would actually rise above the high hills to the east, but, although the anchoress could still see her breath, she could already see blue sky with its promise of a beautiful, clear day.

Elsa was moving on the other side of the wall, but before she could be engaged, the sound of horses and people edged around to the window from the front of the church. Christi quickly hung the dark curtain back in its place, obscuring her from visitors. Though it felt holy to her, admiring the sunrise was surely not one of her ecclesiastical duties. Momentarily, Bishop Hugues’ voice called softly to her. She took a deep breath, put on her reserved mask, and moved the curtain. Today, he was not wearing his tall

miter or carrying his crosier. Instead, his cassock skimmed the ground, and it was covered with the whitest linen Christiana'd ever seen. He wore a short cape draped over his shoulders and on his head, a simple skullcap.

"Good morning, anchoress." Little clouds puffed out his mouth and disappeared into the air.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"You did splendidly during the ceremonies. How did you fare through the night?"

"Well, thank you."

"I have a limited time to visit with you. The trip back to Bouillon is long and arduous." *For the horses*, she thought. "And I have much to attend to after my absence. However, I wondered if you found your first manuscript?"

"The Guide for Anchoresses."

"Yes. This was penned by a Cistercian monk to keep recluses on the righteous path. You'll study it as you copy. When it's complete, read aloud to Elsa the appropriate passages and then pen a letter directly to me in Bouillon. I will dispatch a courier to gather the text and deliver the next one. An experienced scribe might take four months to copy a small book like this. I'll expect this one by, perhaps, Michaelmas." *About the time the baby will arrive*, she thought. Goosebumps rose on her arms. The bishop didn't seem to notice.

"Do you expect illuminations, Your Grace?"

"In this book, keep them few, perhaps only the first letter in each of the eight sections. Certainly add no color. In future texts, you will have a chance to flex your

artistic muscles, but remember, humility comes before honor. Be not overly proud of your skills. Are you pleased with the tools and desk the Church has provided you?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Wonderful! Then I shall depart." But the old man did not leave the window. Just as when they first met, Christiana sensed a swell of sincerity and goodwill from the prelate. He added, "Be strong. Confinement can try the soul." She wondered what he knew about it. "'I will pray' you said to me, and that is the best advice I can give back to you." Christiana bowed her head, and the bishop made the sign of the cross. Then he was gone in a flourish of fuchsia.

The curtain remained open to bring light into the room, and the smell of something delicious wafted in through the little door.

"What did the bishop say?" Elsa asked as she served fresh lake trout in its pan.

"He wants me to be his humble scribe. He left me a guide for anchoresses, and I'm supposed to study it while I copy. I'm also to read aloud certain parts to you."

"That will be interesting," she said, helping herself to half the fish. "Piet has a surprise for you. He should be here shortly."

"I wondered if you know why there's no bed in the anchorhold."

"God's blood, Christi! That's the surprise. You'll see soon." Christiana laughed at her friend's blasphemy, given the situation, wondering how much Father Villenc could hear through the walls if he were in the nave.

"Well, can you tell me about the privy? That already gave me a surprise."

"Oh, sorry, I meant to do that that last night. Piet, Mattheus, and I have been talking about your enclosure since before the suffragan bishop came to see you. Mattheus

traveled to Bouillon to help build the fort where he saw a contraption like yours in the garderobe. He married the idea with a monk's lavatorium he'd heard of built over a river. So, when the anchorhold wall was opened, Piet dug a steep trench down to the little stream that feeds the river behind the church, and Mattheus lined it end to end with clay shafts. All I have to do is bring you moss or mullein, which is a great improvement over the method I used with Hildegarde."

"Won't it smell?" She tightened her face in disgust. There was something embarrassing about the three of them having spent so much time concerned with her waste.

"Every day, you'll pour some of your water down the chute. Like a rich lord or lady, you have an indoor privy!"

Christi shook her head in disbelief and smiled. Just then, she heard someone clearing his throat outside. Normally, a man's approach would cut her nerves, but the anchorhold protected her so. She felt reborn through this safe feeling. Piet stood at the window with a sheepish grin on his face.

"Good morning, anchoress." The title felt too formal.

"Good morning, Piet. Please, just Christiana. Like before."

"Good morning, Christiana," he teased, and his easy smile made hers easy, too. "I have something for you that I hope you'll like. I know you're to be living strictly. But I think if you've got the *hard* job of praying for us all, you should have a *soft* place to lay your head at night." The groundskeeper began to lift up sacks of morrit wool and push them through her window. A quizzical look prompted Piet to throw a thumb over his shoulder toward the paddock. "My first shearing from the ewes I bought from Tanner."

The fibers had already been worsted. This was valuable, and she began to shake her head. He dismissed her protest with a wave of his hand. “Now, before you go saying ‘no,’ in exchange for this I expect my name at the top of your list of prayers every day. Also, I didn’t give you all of it. I kept some for the market. You’re going to have to mix it with straw and sew yourself a mattress cover. You can use the sacks here as ticking.”

“Thank you” was all Christiana could manage. This was the most generous gift she’d received her entire life, save the comforter from her father, and Piet barely knew her. Deeply grateful, the anchoress reached out and took his hand in her own. She could see her pleasure gave him great joy because the merry eyes were back.

“Sleep well, Anchoress Christiana,” he said in parting.

“Well, what do you think of that?” Elsa asked with interest, passing Hildegard’s needle and thread through the door.

“It seems you’ve conspired with some friends to make my incarceration bearable.” Christiana got to work ripping seams out of the sacks and sewing them back together lengthwise. She was no seamstress, but it was easy if she took her time. She had lots of that. While Christi sat by the window and worked on the ticking, Elsa left to gather the freshest hay she could find. It would likely come from Tanners’ fields, and the anchoress would try very hard to not let that vex her.

A low, familiar whistle signaled Eiki’s approach. He carried a full pack on his back and a heavy load of notched wood in his arms so he couldn’t wave to her. But his broad smile made his eyes glint like sunlight on rippled water and his lovably eager face was a welcome sight.

“Your humors are better than they were yesterday about this time,” she said to greet him.

“Well, today everyone isn’t staring at you, watching you being entombed.” Eiki looked left toward the back of the church and right toward the road warily. He dropped his voice. “I have your blanket.” He opened the pack, quickly pulled the comforter out, and stuffed it through the window. It carried a familiar smell, but she was surprised that it didn’t make her homesick or regretful. Instead, she felt excited that she would use it to nest in her new home. Then Eiki began to pass the hewn wood through as well.

“What’s this?”

“Father and I thought you would stay warmer if your pallet was up off the floor. Just lay out the four larger pieces, joining them at the notches.” He leaned his head into the window, pointing to the sections. “Yes. Right,” he instructed as she found the corners and stacked them correctly. “Now,” he said, handing more wood through, “lay these planks on top of those.” He indicated the way he wanted them placed. “Good. There are eight of them. Is that pallet long enough for you?”

“Oh, Eiki, it’s perfect. You’re so thoughtful. Tell your father the Bakers will be near the top of my prayer list every day,” Christi said, remembering Piet’s request and imagining that it would be a common refrain the villagers would appreciate. She discerned from Eiki’s grin that it would be welcome news at the Baker house later. “Did Jan and Berte move into the apartment?”

“They did, right after your ceremony. Your father was just...gone. Jan said you’d left it so clean. Berte vows to send you a little butter each day with our bread, but she

didn't do it today because going up and down the stairs with the baby made her too tired to churn." There again was that easy laughter between friends she treasured.

"Do you have time to play Nine Men's Morris with me?" They balanced the board on the window's wide ledge and tried to best one another. Able to anticipate two moves ahead, Christiana won every game. When the church bells rang, the baker's son jumped up hurriedly, unaware that so much time had passed. "Many blessings on you, young man," the anchoress called playfully as he turned the corner, waving over his shoulder until he was out of sight.

Before midday, Christiana had the mattress sewn. When Elsa returned with the straw, she handed it through the inner door in small batches to be added to the wool and crammed into the ticking. Soon the pallet was complete and sitting on top of the frame the Bakers had made. Adding the comforter made Christi want to assess the project, and she climbed into bed with Pepper beside her. She looked at the high, conical ceiling of the anchorhold, noticing the tiny cracks in the masonry and the stones jutting unevenly from the grey walls. On the earthy smell of lanolin and hay, she floated toward her customary nap.

By the time the bell sounded nones, the anchoress was ready for Mass. Elsa had checked the snares on the hill and was stewing marten for supper when Christi heard some congregants entering the church next door. If she stood at the squint, she could see the altar and just part of the front bench, so unless one of her neighbors chose to sit up front on the right, she wouldn't know who was attending. Of course, they couldn't see her either. She watched Father Villenc step onto the dais as voices sang the opening psalm. Then they started Kyrie Eleison with its nine invocations. The priest intoned the prayer

for the day with his back to his flock. Two lessons followed in French, with a hymn interspersed.

Piet brought up the bread and wine while those in attendance sang the Offertory psalm. Villenc arranged the gifts, washed his hands, and said the Secret. The worshippers recited the Lord's prayer in Latin, and Christiana wondered how many understood what they were saying. The kiss of peace and communion followed. This was when she became a part of the service. Father Villenc first came to present the body to her. Since he was tall, he reached through the cross-shaped window easily and placed the bread in her hands. She put it in her mouth. Then he offered her the chalice. She drank deeply, letting the sweet-tart wine from Rochehaut Abbey slide down her throat. She hadn't realized she was so thirsty, and Villenc looked at her askance for swallowing so much.

Only a few villagers could spare the time to join Mass daily, but it was Holy Saturday. The church sounded crowded. There would be many more worshippers tomorrow. While the parishioners came forward for their communion, she went to her altar to pray. She started with Piet, Eiki, Monsieur Baker, Elsa, then Madam Baker, Jan and Berte and their baby, then Evrard. She was surprised her brother was so far down the list. Mattheus, Colin the fisherman, all of the Tanners. She walked down the road in her mind and thought of each family she knew and asked God to keep them healthy and safe. Then she thought about the monks at the abbey, starting with Bernart, who had delivered the ale, and then the abbot. Christiana could not remember his name and it did not matter. She imagined a white ball of goodness rolling up the hill and engulfing the monastery. She decided to pray for Father Villenc, too, despite his suspicious expressions. Next she prayed for her mother and Elsa's mother and father and Clara Tanner and Hildegarde,

commending their souls to Heaven. Her father and then her attacker popped into her mind, and she pushed them away. Antone de Lul and Bishop Hugues deserved mention. She said a special prayer on behalf of the baby growing within her, and asked God to make her labor easy.

Finally, just when she was about done, she decided to petition for Pepper. Probably it was blasphemy to pray for animals, but she resolved that since God had made them, he must also watch over them. The anguish in the eyes of a pig during slaughter and the smile on the face of a dog being scratched on the head in the sunshine proved to her that, surely, the beasts had souls. *Let Pepper's labor be easy, too*, she requested with her hands folded on the altar. By the time she was done with her supplications, the dismissal and procession back to the sacristy were long over, so she grabbed the Nine Men's Morris board and opened the little door between the anchorhold and Elsa's room. Elsa wasn't there. *Gathering gossip after Mass*, Christi thought.

A heady aroma wafted in, making Christiana's stomach grumble to protest her impotence—never again would she serve herself, relying instead on her friend's assistance. Then a fear seized her, one she hadn't yet considered. What if something happened to Elsa and no one knew? Christi might starve in the anchorhold all alone. No, she could call for help. Piet or Villenc would hear her, wouldn't they? But if there was a snowstorm like the night her mother died, no one would. The bishop had warned her about this kind of madness, and a deep breath calmed her nerves.

"We have a tot of butter from Berte!" sang Elsa as she reentered the annex. She stopped dead when she saw her friend's anxious face peeping through the opening.

"What's wrong?"

“If something happens to you, is there a way for me to get someone’s attention?”

Then, allowing herself to think of her impending labor, truly for the first time, she added,

“What if I get really sick?”

“Something would have to happen to Father Villenc, to Piet, *and* to me,” Elsa said, “in order for you to be in any danger. If Villenc doesn’t see you at Mass, he comes to me. Piet must check daily about our wood pile, the building and the grounds. If the whole day passes and he cannot find me, he must come to you.

“Now, if you get sick enough to require the physician—or if there’s a fire or attack of some sort—I have permission to seek Mattheus for help in removing stones enough to get the doctor in or to get you out. So, you see, you have nothing to worry about.”

“Would it be foolish to ask Eiki to come see me every day so that I had one other person I know would look out for me?”

“Oh, I know he wouldn’t mind that,” she said with feigned snark that Christi couldn’t fathom. “He is usually the one who delivers the bread anyway.”

As dusk settled in the valley, Christiana, wrapped in her comforter, watched through the gap in the stone wall. The breeze played a calm tune through the budding trees rising up the slopes from the river’s edge. Ducks glided down onto the Semois, honked their arrival, and dabbled for fish. A red fox stalked its prey. Each time he botched his attempt and looked around as if someone would judge his failure, it made Christiana laugh. She was disappointed when he moved out of her sight.

The anchoress lay back on her new pallet and considered her first day in the anchorhold. Except for the momentary panic about being neglected or forgotten, it had been an enjoyably full day. She'd had visitors to her window—one cleric, one crofter, and one collaborator. She'd received two extravagant gifts, and she'd eaten three hearty meals, more than she normally would have. She'd sewn and napped and prayed.

Christiana turned on her side, pressing her shoulders against the stone. The black curtain puffed inward, and Pepper landed on the floor. The cat stretched luxuriously, with long front legs and claws extended, and spun herself into the crux between the girl's elbows and knees. Warmth emanated from the chimney at Christi's back, from the tabby curled against her stomach, and from the relief in her mind. Her consciousness melted like honey in the sun.

For the *mediatrix*, the second morning of confinement started with a crack of thunder. Rain poured down in sheets thick as tapestries, making the anchorhold heavy with humidity. Elsa served bread, butter, and an egg to break their fast, and then they played a game of chess through the door.

"I'm not expecting many visitors today."

"You're right. No one'll be praying outside in the rain, although they should be giving thanks for it. It hasn't rained in weeks." Christi nodded. She hadn't thought of that, swathed in her own concerns.

After Elsa called, "Check mate!" and they'd tidied the board, Christiana turned her attention to the guide for anchoresses.

"I'm going to read the book Bishop Hugues left for me to scribe."

“I’m going to fetch water.”

“In this rain?”

“I put the pails outside the door this morning. They’re probably full already. Rain water always tastes better than the river.” Christi left her friend to her work, and she turned to her own, brightening the cell with a rushlight.

She pulled the three-legged stool up to the table and opened the cover of the small guide that sat on the angled top of the desk. The beginning vacillated between treating its audience of female solitaries as fragile vessels, who must exert their utmost vigilance in guarding their lives from their carnal nature, and as willful, resolute descendants of the laudable desert recluses of the early Church.

After outlining the hours and types of prayers an anchoress should perform, which Christi would copy but likely ignore herself, the author proceeded to discuss the distractions and bad influences that the senses might bring, beginning with sight. “My dear sisters,” he wrote, “love your windows as little as you can.” *Oh, no*, she thought, thinking of the fox, *I’m already breaking that rule*. She shrugged, considering that she was interpreting her role in the anchorhold much more loosely than she suspected other anchorites would be elsewhere in Liege or the Walloon or in far-flung Britain. For a moment, her mind wandered to those pious women, similarly sequestered, and it gave her consolation to think that she was not the only person in the world abiding this ascetic existence. Were the others indebted to their friends for their gifts and compassion? Did they spend the whole day in supplication? Had any of *them* entered the anchorhold falsely?

The writer elaborated, not so much on the evils of seeing but of being seen. He warned not to trust the intentions of men, even the clergy, citing instances she did not recognize from history, like Augustine and Bernard and St. Martin of Tours. Did Eiki count as a man? He was only twelve years old. She thought not. And Piet? She knew his nature, and his was a clear heart. However, she might cite this passage when it came time to cover the window as her belly expanded and threatened her secret. As yet, the loose tunic concealed her bump.

Next, the words highlighted the potential difficulties of the anchoress, acutely aware of the lack of companionship that might plague and tempt her. The author warned of pregnancies—here Christiana wondered how one would get pregnant in the anchorhold and could think of no physical possibilities—gossip, fraud, and even deceptive maid-servants tempting the virtue of their mistresses. He wrote, “Touching of hands or any contact between a man and an anchoress is a thing so unseemly and a deed so shameful and so naked a sin, so horrible to all the world and so great a scandal, that there is no need to speak or write against it, for without any writing at all the foulness is too apparent.” He would have despised her grasping Piet’s hand in thanks yesterday. She laughed out loud.

“What are you sniggering about in there?” asked Elsa, poking her head through the door.

“This guide for anchoresses is...” Christi trailed off, not sure how to explain.

“Is what? Funny? I don’t believe that.” So the anchoress read aloud some of the excerpts, translating them for Elsa. “Well, that’s how Hildegard was.” The statement lacked judgment, showing Elsa’s change in attitude about the piety of the anchorhold.

Theirs was a life forged not by devout spirituality but by necessity, and Christiana had made peace with that, while acknowledging that she would have to play her role genuinely to bolster her neighbors and to survive. On tiptoes, Christi peered through the squint.

“I’m wondering if Father Villenc can hear us,” she said, lying on her side to talk through the door. “It wouldn’t do for him to listen in on our irreverent conversations.”

“Stuff this in the squint.” Elsa handed her a kirtle.

“He’s already suspicious of me, Elsa. Won’t he question why this cloth is blocking the anchorhold from the church?”

“You’ve gotten quite good at deception. Think of something. Use the guide you’ve been reading to me.”

“The evils of being seen?”

“That might do.” Christiana decided to wait until after Easter Mass to plug the space with the fabric and looked down thoughtfully at her growing midsection. The barrier would help to stifle her wailing during childbirth, too. Her brow furrowed, but she went back to the manuscript. On fresh parchment, she began to copy the monk’s unflinching rules for an unnamed, unknown anchoress.

Chapter 28

The rain tapered off midday, and Christiana had a visitor, which was well for she was in need of a rest from transcribing the guide. It was Piet, and she thanked him again for the fleece.

“You were the first on my prayer list, and you always will be,” she said. “Oh, I wanted to ask you, how do you keep the time for the church bells? And how do you stay awake to ring them every three hours?”

“There’s a canonical sundial on the side of Sint Sebastian’s. Did you ever see it?” Christiana shook her head. “It’s a half circle with the hours on it. I ring prime, tierce, sext, nones, vespers, and compline. Villenc rings matins and lauds since he is awake for those night prayers anyway. So I’m able to sleep.”

“What happens when there’s no sun, like today?”

“I guess.” They laughed. “Christiana, I came to talk to you about something.” Such was the pleasant, conversational way that Piet had that she’d almost forgotten her duties. She quickly shook herself into her counselor role. “I am heartsick. It’s the reason I bought the lambs. Trying to be a more appealing suitor.” He shrugged, his embarrassment and angst apparent. Keeping secrets filches so much from the soul. Christi wanted so badly to know the name of the potential paramour. Perhaps Elsa’s gossip mongering was affecting her. The guide she’d been copying condemned this, specifically, and so she held her tongue and let Piet continue. “She’s not yet betrothed, so I don’t believe I’m committing a sin, but I’m over-troubled by my affections and unfocused on my responsibilities. I am afraid that my mistakes will be so obvious that I’ll lose my position...” He stopped and looked at the anchoress imploringly. Christi fumbled for an apt way to address his worries which seemed, perhaps not so much petty as trifling, spiritually inconsequential. She’d thought the villagers would only bring her weighty, religious concerns.

“Let’s pray, Piet, not for the woman to return your affections, for that’s on Fortune’s wheel, but for God to bring you peace and keep you focused on that which you can control.” They prayed the Our Father together. When they were done, Christiana added, “You know, Piet, I’ve seen you make no mistakes. You’re very good at your job. I wouldn’t worry too much about that. And just yesterday I was thinking what good humors you have. A decent man like you merits confidence. Could you ask her father for permission to court her?”

“She is orphaned.” After a moment he added, “And I’m afraid she’ll reject me. I don’t think my heart could withstand it.”

As he strode away, she felt somehow that her counsel had been lacking. She criticized herself harshly for weighing his distress against others, and she vowed to be more helpful to the next parishioner.

The subsequent visitor turned out to be Eiki, delivering their bread, and Christi immediately asked if he would be her safeguard against neglect. He agreed straightaway to visit her every afternoon, which relieved her. Then he shared his own woes. “My uncle’s wife, my Aunt Florie, died. We just received word through a pilgrim coming south from Rochefort, where his bakery is.” Eiki’s anguish was writ on his face, and she felt her own brow wrinkle in response. “He’s all alone, Christi. And it’s Easter.”

“Let’s pray for him, Eiki, and for Aunt Florie.” This prayer was most earnest, for she felt her friend’s distress as if it were her own, as he’d done when her mother had died. They recited the paternoster together, and through it, she held his hand. At the moment,

she didn't give a plucked hen for the anchoritic guide sitting on the table behind her. After the prayer, they sat quietly for a while.

"Is he old, Eiki? Forgive me for saying this, but might he remarry?"

"He's my father's older brother, so he's old. Maybe forty years? And he was devoted to my aunt, like my father is to Ma. They were best friends. I don't think he'd ever marry again. He has such a beautiful bakery, Christi, in the small city of Rochefort. I was only there once, but I remember its cobblestone streets and window boxes filled with evergreens. Music everywhere, even in winter. They had a small table with two benches out front of the shop. When they were done baking for the day, they'd sit outside and drink and talk and laugh with their neighbors." This image charmed her, and she mourned the uncle's loss all the more because of it.

"Oh, Eiki, I'm so sorry. Please tell your father I will be praying for his brother. Think of all your uncle's customers and friends who laughed with him and with Florie. Surely, they're mourning with him and will be close by to give him comfort in the coming weeks."

"Thank you, Christiana." There would be no game-playing today. She cursed the window for being too small for a hug, settling for a final hand squeeze instead. Eiki dragged his feet dolefully as he walked away from her window. This counseling session had progressed better than her first, but she reprimanded herself for starting both conversations with her own queries. She'd committed to giving rather than taking, and so far she'd been a recipient far more often than a benefactor. This anchoress job was going to be more complicated than she had originally anticipated, but she felt invigorated by the challenge and galvanized by her desire to help others overcome their miseries, however

large or small they might seem to her. Hildegarde had been so helpful in shrinking Christi's own sorrow, it was time for she herself to be useful.

After the Holy Mass of Easter that afternoon, a pair of pilgrims visited. The young man waited by the river, using his staff to move river rocks unhurriedly while the woman, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a long, brown, badge-covered cloak, sat with Christiana.

"I'm called Amee," the woman said, with an ample smile showing her beautiful teeth, like two rows of tiny whitewashed cottages turned sidewise. The accent suggested she was from France, although she navigated the Liege dialect easily as they talked. Christiana was surprised that Amee did not want to pray with her. Rather, she told about their travels to Santiago de Compostela, displaying her lead scallop-shell badge proudly. She undid the clasp and handed it to the anchoress.

"It looks like an angel with wings," remarked Christiana, who had never before seen a salt water shell. The religious wayfaring life seemed so much more respectful than the wanderlust existence that her father favored, although they amounted to about the same in the end, she decided. Amee told Christi about ascending the hundred and thirty steps to the shrine at the top of the promontory near the end of the pilgrim's path and of the sound and power of the ocean waves hitting the rocks below St. James' resting place.

Amee could see that her story had much of an effect on the anchoress. Generously, she said, "Keep the badge. And pray for me and for my brother, please."

Next, Amee's traveling companion approached the anchorhold while she visited Hildegarde's gravestone in the cemetery. He did not want to pray either.

“Good afternoon, Sister. I understand from some at the inn that you can read and write. I can do neither,” he said humbly, “but Amee and I have been traveling for half the year from our home in Chartres. Our family expected us to return much sooner. May I ask you to pen a letter on our behalf?” He produced a parchment hesitantly from his scrip, raising his eyebrows hopefully.

“Of course. I have to go to my desk to write it,” she said to explain her disappearance from the window.

He dictated slowly, “My dear Mother and Father, Amee and I are well, having journeyed safely to and from St. James’ shrine on Spain’s coast. We now pass through Frahan in Liege to attend Easter Mass with the saintly Christiana, a newly-installed anchoress here.” Christi smiled at the compliment and thought of her name being read aloud in faraway France. “Next we are to Cologne to the reliquary of the Three Kings with the intent to return home thereafter. We apologize for any concern our extended pilgrimage may cause you both. Fear not, for we are secure in God’s hands and continue to meet kindness in each village and town. Give our love to Francois and Abram. Your humble and abiding son, Jehan.” She folded the vellum and added “To Chartres” in large capitals on the opposite side so that the hands that passed the letter on its way would know its destination.

“Thank you. Thank you. God bless you, Christiana.” Jehan’s ardent gratitude for something so simple as a penned letter amused the anchoress. She passed the parchment through the window.

“God bless you, Jehan. And may he protect you in your travels. Godspeed!”

Christiana meditated until compline on the surging sea she had pictured in her mind. She imagined a larger version of the waves that appeared infrequently on a storm-tossed Semois and sat down to draw a whitecap as an A to begin another page in her journal. Thus ended Easter in the year 1300.

Chapter 29

While the villagers of Frahan celebrated Corpus Christi by feasting in the bower near the marketplace, Pepper stared with dilated pupils and began to pace, then sit, then pace again. The cat moved away quickly when Christi tried to pet her. Attentive helplessness was Christiana's fate for the moment. Eventually, the cat lay on rags arranged in the corner and began to heave and push and lick below her tail. Her strange behavior was worrisome, but Pepper seemed only to be in mild distress. If she were in labor, there wasn't much the anchoress could do except encourage with her words, which was, of course, now her life's calling, after all. She admitted to herself that she'd gotten better at it over the last few weeks, and now she tried it on the cat.

She said, "You're doing fine, Pepper. Don't be scared. You're going to be a great mother. Think of all the moggies in the world who've done this before you. You'll have beautiful babies. All will be well," and so on until one particularly intense lurch produced a tiny, wet, black head. Christiana jumped up with a gasp of awe. On the next push, the kitten was out and Pepper was licking him with such vigor that Christi fretted for his life. But her anxiety was unjustified, as the baby began to squirm and shakily move towards his mother's belly. Pepper chewed through the umbilical sac and panted, open-mouthed,

as the kitten suckled. Another push and still another produced two more black balls of fur, and it seemed Pepper's exertions were complete. She cleaned each kitten in turn while Christiana resisted the urge to hold them.

When Elsa returned, flush from the festivities, Christi shared the good news. Elsa exclaimed and handed over a river-cooled bottle of ale and a plate piled high with blancmange and buttered bread. Then she pushed her head through the opening so she could get a glimpse of the new arrivals. The wonder of birth made her smile broadly and coo at the kittens. Christi mocked her friend's teeth, red from all the wine she'd drunk at the feast.

The next day, Christi pulled herself away from the litter long enough to finish another chapter in the guide for anchoresses, which stated, "Reading is good prayer. Reading teaches how and what to pray, and prayer obtains it afterwards. During reading, when the heart is pleased, a devotion arises which is worth many prayers." Despite not understanding what the second sentence meant, she recognized her own joy in the final sentiment. She recalled the passion she'd felt for the marks and pictures on the pages of her psalter when she was younger. An idea scratched around the back side of her mind, but failed to crawl out into the light. The hours of transcribing had tired her eyes, and trying to coax the idea into fruition had tired her wits. The anchoress stretched out on the pallet.

Momentarily, her mother sat holding a book on her lap in a corner of a courtyard. It was Rochehaut Abbey. Mary read aloud to a circle of dogs and children, looked up and smiled at her daughter, and bent her head back over the text without pausing in her

speech, although Christiana could not hear a word of it. Then, she noticed a pile of books behind her mother—texts of all shapes, some as small as the palm of a man’s hand, others as large as a yoke. Pepper curled around the mound of manuscripts, nuzzling the text on the top of the pile, shamelessly searching for someone to stroke her. One little girl at Mary’s feet obliged and the dream faded. Christiana awoke with the lurking idea properly illumed.

She hadn’t spoken to her brother since the confession, and it was time to try steering gently over the bumps between them. Her quill flew over a blank piece of vellum. When next Eiki came to visit, he was delighted by Pepper’s kittens and more than happy to dispatch his friend’s letter to Brother Evrard at the abbey by way of Beau Sejour.

Evrard’s reply came indirectly several days later when Brother Bernart arrived with three books for the anchoress. Tucked inside the front cover of one was a note from the abbot—whose name was Martin, so now she could say a proper prayer for him. The letter said Rochehaut Abbey was proud to share their library with their Sister Christiana and that the sacrist had chosen this variety specifically for her. Every two weeks, Abbot Martin wrote, Bernart would return with several more for her perusal. Christi felt as she had when she, Elsa, Eiki, and Evrard had floated down the river. Though she might not be a wealthy lady of the manor, she deemed herself quite rich. Without waiting, she sat by the window and began to visit the far corners of the world in a book of saints.

Each day, Christiana met with villagers, who, like insatiable infants, were greedy for her solace. The parishioners filled her days such that she often copied just a page or two of the bishop's guide. They interrupted her reading and her prayers and her meals, and there was very little she could do about it, often wishing for a sign that could be posted to deter them, but, of course, most could not read. Her afternoon nap was as a friendly traveler disappearing down the end of a road. She missed it sorely, for as the baby waxed, her own energy waned.

One particularly taxing day, Madam Tanner arrived for the first time, twisting her hands together and sighing over and over again. Christiana mustered her mettle to oblige the most influential woman in Frahan.

"Good forenoon, Christiana," Madam Tanner said, her baggy eyes beseeching the anchoress. The woman's distress hung on her, heavy as a millstone.

"Good day to you, Madam Tanner," Christi replied as solidly as she could.

"I have been remiss for not visiting you sooner," the woman began. "I carry a guilt which I prefer not to confess to the priest. It weighs on me night and day." She paused and sighed again, shakily. "Before Clara's accident, I was driving the family hard, like a team of plow horses, hoping to increase our banalities. By speeding up the grinding done at our mill before Lent, I brought money into the Tanner coffers, but at what price? Clara, trying to please me, moved quickly, too quickly, and in her haste, got her hand caught on the quern-stone." Her countenance twisted in agony, she whispered, "My greed killed my daughter." She bawled inaudibly into her apron, which she had pressed to her face.

Like everyone in the village, Christiana believed, sometimes covetously, that Fortune had always favored the Tanners. For the first time, Christi considered that their lives were not charmed. The anchoress thought, shocked, *Even the rich suffer*. Christiana was seized with a desire to tell Madam Tanner what had happened in their field on New Year's Eve, to show that she, too, had endured the unendurable. She could understand the woman's guilty conscience, for her actions might well have led to her daughter's death. Considering her words carefully so that they would bring comfort, Christi reached out gently to undo the woman's knotted hands and take them in her own. "Do not question God's need for an angel by blaming yourself, Madam Tanner. Only He knows why He called Clara home sooner than we would have liked."

They prayed the paternoster two, three, four times, more. Christiana lost count. It was as if by repeating the prayer, Madam Tanner hoped she could resurrect her daughter. When they said "Amen" together, Christiana consoled her by saying, "Surely, Clara has already granted you forgiveness, if ever there was need to give it in the first place. We humans are greedy by nature, Madam Tanner. And mayhap by confessing your greed to Father Villenc, you will finally feel God's forgiveness for this familiar sin. You might also consider using your wealth for good, by helping the needy in Frahan, as an act of contrition."

"Yes." From the parched desert of her guilt, the old woman drank in Christiana's counsel. "Yes, that is what I shall do. Dear anchoress, you've no idea how much peace you've brought me."

"I might, Madam Tanner, for when my own mother died, I believed for some time that I could have saved her if I had only been braver or more learned. And I carried that

guilt and anguish on my back until one day I sat at this very window with Hildegarde. My words, spoken aloud finally, unleashed my pain so that I was able to circle back to myself, whole again. I *became* braver and smarter, and I felt my mother and God had absolved me my weaknesses. For we are all weak and greedy and guilty, but no good comes from reminding ourselves of that at sunrise and sunset and all the hours in between.” Madam Tanner left lighter, and Christiana pushed her to the top of the daily prayer list.

Madam Tanner would return to Christiana often after that, and regale her with the good deeds she’d done in the village with Tanner long crosses. She was less harsh, she said, with her husband and her extended brood, and thus was happier than she had been even before Clara’s death. Each time she visited, she pressed a coin into Christi’s palm. As the weather cooled, the Tanners’ gratitude caused the new anchoress’s reputation to grow as big as her belly.

Lelien Deckere visited the anchorhold frequently, too, and of all the women who sought her guidance, Christiana had to admit that she loved this one the most, the same way she favored the runt of Pepper’s litter, then watched joyfully as he became as strong as his brother and sister. Elsa complained that Lelien was fickle, but then Elsa wasn’t privy to the same information as her anchoress. Christiana was very careful not to repeat any of the wretchedness the villagers shared with her, lest Elsa’s gossip tendencies turn the parishioners against their *mediatrix*. Lelien, with the deep-set eyes and the humors of a game animal, would reveal a little slice of her woe-filled life in hushed tones and then, after a quick Hail Mary, slip away from the window. Christi sometimes wondered if

she'd really been there at all. During the months the baby grew, Lelien shared snippets, in no particular order, while the anchoress, like a sheriff investigating a crime, had to piece the clues together.

When the wheat was about ready for threshing, Christiana finally had a full understanding of the woman's life. She'd been abused at every turn. Her older half-brother had harmed her over a number of years when she was a little girl. To escape, she had married the first man to wink at her. Lelien was twelve when she and Ghoris stood on the steps of Sint Sebastian's to exchange vows. But Ghoris was a violent drinker who shook their first baby to death, stopped drinking, fell through a roof and broke his leg, started drinking again, and then gave her two strong boys who protected her from his attacks by taking them on themselves.

After a hue and cry went up one night in response to the boys' screams, the priest told Ghoris to choose a pilgrimage or the Holy War to expiate his sins. Ghoris chose the Crusade and left with his brother. Thanks to Elsa's chatter, Christiana knew how that had ended for poor Lelien. For years, she had waited for Ghoris to return, and Wouter the Smith became her constant companion. Finally, she found some contentment with Wouter, bearing him four children before Ghoris rode his raggedy horse back into Frahan and upset her mite of happiness, reclaiming her as his own. Now no one was happy—not the children, not Wouter, not Ghoris, and most of all, not Lelien. Most nights, Ghoris drank at Beau Sejour until matins bells rang in the valley, and then came home to pass out, sometimes with coins in his pocket, sometimes without.

The pennies were the reason Lelien claimed to have visited Christiana the first time. She admitted to swiping one coin from her husband's breeches each night Ghoris

returned from the inn and collapsed face down on their bed. They wouldn't be missed, Lelien reasoned, and she might need them. "To escape" were her precise words. The wife collected the coins slowly, hiding them around the cottage. But when Ghoris found two of them, he was suspicious, and the next time he went out drinking with his brother, Lelien combed the house for them all and dug a hole in the yard. With her secret buried, she'd made her way to Christiana, more for the good company and the peace than to repent.

Now that summer was drawing to an end, though, the boys wanted to expand the garden, and their plan was to dig where her treasure was hidden. Lelien considered her options, which were few. This position reminded Christiana of the fix in which she and Elsa had found themselves in January. Since Lelien and Christiana had become friends, the sullen wife asked her to keep the jug of coins in the anchorhold for safekeeping, promising to stop taking new ones from Ghoris if only she would agree. Christiana thought, *They cannot go into the anchorhold, of course*, and remembered how Hildegarde had protected the psalter for her. Stolen money was a bit different than a religious book, but this was another woman in need, a woman who had been playing chess her whole life without a queen. Christiana agreed to safeguard the coins.

By the ides of September, Christi was talking with her visitors from behind the closed curtain, for even the comforter over her body, which might draw suspicion in this heat anyway, could not conceal her swollen stomach. She cited the Guide for Anchoresses as her reason to draw the cloth across the gap between herself and those she counseled and no one seemed perturbed by it. She also visited with Elsa at the door less frequently, which was fine, since Elsa's laughter could be heard floating in from near the

river's edge regularly these days. When Christi's water broke, she told Elsa to pass the word that she was quite ill and that she would not accept visitors. Piet nailed two pieces of wood together in the shape of an X and staked them into the ground by the bench outside her window, which effectively prevented callers. Christi stuffed the kirtle into the squint and began to pace back and forth across the packed dirt floor, trying to recall the words she'd used to comfort the cat.

The pain and terror came in waves so severe that she vomited. Hearing this through the closed hidey-door, Elsa knocked to give her some fresh water, and Christi finally admitted, "I'm in labor." Elsa did not ask any questions, but rather swapped the servant's role for the midwife's, bringing clean sheets out of the chest and heating water to boil. This composed shift made the anchoress wonder if her friend had suspected the secret. While Christiana panted like a dog, Elsa passed in damp rags to place on her head and whispered to her friend in a soothing voice. Christiana told enough of the tale to make Elsa understand. Because of the rolling pain, she did not care if her friend was judging her harshly, but she suspected that she was not.

By the ringing of the sext bells, Christi had the urge to push. She bit on a rolled up piece of vellum to stifle her cries when the pain was at its worst. Elsa stayed at the door, helplessly attentive, as Christi had been with Pepper. Between gasps, Christiana said, "I keep thinking of all the women in the world who've done this before me."

"If they could do it, so can you. You're the strongest person I know, Christi." This gave her the courage to push mightily and although no baby appeared yet, she felt searing movement, not unlike the rape that put her here. She began to weep, remembering. The sobbing continued throughout this bout of agony, and then at the next twinge, she

grabbed Elsa's hand and squeezed and pushed and, just like she'd witnessed with the cat, the head was out and between her legs.

The rest of the birth was so much easier. While the vesper bells rang, the baby, a boy, slid out onto the bloody sheet and cried out only once. Christi cleaned him with warm water and wrapped him in her comforter. Elsa handed her Piet's iron shears—when she'd gotten them today, Christi couldn't remember—and the anchoress cut the cord. Soon the placenta heaved and her breasts engorged with milk. The infant's mouth opened and closed like a dying fish and clamped onto her nipple. This fresh sting was somehow worse than the labor, but she must keep him quiet and calm throughout Mass and so she bore this, also.

The compline bells woke her and she looked down at the baby, barely visible now in the fading light. Her groin throbbed, but what welled up within her heart was almost unbearable. Though he was a son of a rapist, this child was God's own. How would she give him away? How could she keep him? She considered asking Elsa to have the mason bust down the walls. She could take the few coins from Madam Tanner's visits and simply start walking. But she was in so much pain and she was so tired and she was only fourteen years old. She'd not put Elsa in that position, either, and despite the celestial tug of motherhood, she knocked on the door. Her friend, looking pensive, responded.

"What shall we do?"

"Bring the baby to the abbey?"

"Evrard and the brothers would take care of him."

"Or we could get Mattheus."

"And then." It was not a question but rather an unanswerable statement.

Elsa prepared a makeshift sling with her bedcover. Christiana passed the baby boy through the door into her friend's arms. Elsa carried a small jug of milk stopped with a clean rag and set out toward Rochehaut Abbey just as the last of the light escaped the sky. Christi washed herself and crawled to her pallet, gently rolling onto her back. Tears seeped out of the corners of her eyes and pooled in her ears, making her feel as if she were underwater. She said a prayer but forgot it even as it emerged from her lips. It ended "dreadful, dreadful day" and she was asleep.

Christiana could not decide whether Frahan was experiencing a particularly late dog day or if, in fact, she was possessed by a fever. She dozed, unclear what was real and what was a vision. Was it angels or the devil's minions playing on the stage in her mind? As the audience, Christi sat detached and watched as her mother boiled babies in a cauldron, only to pull them out full grown as men who screamed and pointed at Christi and prepared a stake at which to burn her. Then, the world spun and Mary sat reading with the children again, all girls this time, their cherubic faces upturned toward her benevolent half smile as she passed each one a Bible of her own. And then a haze dropped down over the scene, like a curtain falling at the end a mummer play on the market stage. At last, Christiana stood on a cliff overlooking a large body of water. She sensed both relief and the urge to jump off, so she did, and sailed to a small village where window boxes overflowed with purple flowers and music floated down cobblestone streets. Eiki sat on a bench laughing and drinking but she was sad because someone was missing. She could not remember who.

When she woke, she was glazed in sweat, but it was cooling on her skin and she felt unlocked, untainted, formidable. Her stomach growled below her bound breasts. And suddenly she yearned to go outside.

The next day, Bernart arrived at her window with an herbal and two books of remedies in his next pile from the monastic library. One was entitled *Physica*, written, Christi noted with interest, by a woman with a name similar to Frahan's former anchoress. In it, a ribbon, which would seem to those unaware to be arbitrarily placed, marked a page on healing herbs for pregnancy, like fennel and asarum. When she saw this, Christiana knew then that the baby would be well-cared for and that Evrard, in his way, still cared for her.

Madam Baker, with wild hair and kirtle askew, approached the anchorhold not long after Piet removed the sign barring visitors.

"I've come to pray for the baby," she said. Christiana leaned back from the window.

"Which baby, Madam Baker?"

"Your baby, Mary." Christiana was baffled but tried not to show it. "I was rocking her this morning while you went picking mushrooms, and her hue took on a blue cast. I gave her a treacle, but I'm not sure it worked. You'll watch her carefully tonight?"

"Of course, Madam Baker. Let's pray together." While her visitor prayed for Mary's enigmatic baby, Christi prayed instead for her visitor.

When Eiki called on her that afternoon, Christi broached the subject with him. “I had a strange encounter with your mother earlier.”

“Ah, I was waiting for this to happen.” He rubbed his eyes with both hands and moved them up to scratch his head, searching for the words to explain. “She’s gotten confused of late. Wanders the village while we bake, calls me Jan, asks Berte when she’s getting married. She seems to respond well when we put her back on the right path.” He shook his head and added a wry smile. “But later she repeats the same question or stands looking out the window like she’s seeing the village for the first time.”

“That’s horrible.”

“At first, I thought she’d starting taking the drink.” They both snorted at the absurdity of it. “But Father says she’s just getting older. It happens sometimes. He says it happened to Ma’s mother, too, as she aged.”

“What can I do?” But she already knew Eiki’s answer.

“Pray for her, Christi. Pray for all of us.”

Mattheus was one of Christi’s regular callers, stopping sometimes coming to or from Piet’s cottage where he was helping expand the small barn for the sheep. The mason was of an indeterminate age and stocky build and had dry hands gouged with fresh cuts and old scars. His fingers were big as sausages and one was twisted at an odd angle, so that the first time he’d come to visit, Christiana had been afraid she would not be able to hold them.

He didn’t seem to want to pray. He asked, “Did you know I built the anchorhold? Before Villenc was even here, some ten years ago.”

“I didn’t know that. I’ve been admiring it.” This made him laugh.

“It’s got some features from here and there. When I was an apprentice in Amsterdam, I saw a bartizan like yours. It was more difficult to build than a square one, but I thought if Frahan was to have a hermitage, it ought to look different than everything around it.”

“I’m glad you took the time. It’s beautiful. Wait.” She rummaged through her pile of quires and found the illustration she’d drawn on parchment so long ago, where the peak of the anchorhold made the capital A in her prayer. Mattheus was properly impressed. “It’s yours,” she said, adding in mock regality, “A bequest for making mine castle and privy.” Her face burned, but this time, they laughed together. He made to decline the gift, but she rebuffed him. “I can always draw more,” she declared, gesturing toward her stocked writing desk.

“I have a present of sorts for you, too, then.” Shifting to the same noble imitation, although his was far superior to Christi’s impaired attempt, he said, “M’lady, whence thou recline this even’ upon thine pallet, I pray thee notice stones of white.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled mysteriously, tucked Christi’s gift inside his tunic, and was gone. As dusk settled, she looked for the “stones of white” and was shocked to see eight pale footholds in an ascending chevron pattern between the squint and the door to Elsa’s quarters. They stuck out slightly farther than the other, darker rocks of her enclosure. How had she never noticed them before? Although he hadn’t said a prayer with her that day, Mattheus’ offering would become more sacred to her than the psalter or the Bible or the crucifix on her wall.

And so the events in Christiana's full days filed forward, like plated knights marching off to battle—sunrise, breakfast, Elsa, kittens, scribe, counsel, Mass, prayer, Eiki, games, supper, sunset. Time, parceled into weeks, cultivated trust with the parishioners—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Months filled with meaning and function—October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September. For the anchoress, the days sometimes seemed long, but the years were short.

Chapter 30

Of the fifty monks at the small monastery on the hill, Abbot Martin favored those who were learned, hard-working, and compassionate. When a baby was left on the doorstep of the priory in late September, learned, hard-working Evrard volunteered to feed and swaddle him that night and each night for the first week until the young monk was barely awake even when he was standing upright. Martin ordered the infant to be cared for in shifts thereafter, but the abbot finally witnessed the empathy he'd been hoping to see in his protégé. Evrard's star rose quickly through the hierarchy in Rochehaut Abbey. In three years, he was appointed prior, at the right hand of Father Abbot.

Meanwhile, in Rome, Pope Bonafice VIII produced bulls, one after the other, in an attempt to curb the monarch Philip IV. The French king had barred all clergy from administration of the law and begun to collect clerical taxes. The Pope, enraged and

claiming to be the spiritual monarch over all earthly kings, excommunicated Philip. But Philip's power was such that he was able to refute the Papal States, with force. By 1303 the feud was over, with Philip the victor. Bishop Hugues had watched this drama unfold, as had all the clerics in Europe, through letters exchanged and gossip shared at court. The Pope succumbed to a fever, induced, it was said, by a severe beating by Philip's henchmen, and then they were called upon to travel to Rome to elect a new pontiff.

Hugues decided, on his return trip to Bouillon, to visit all the regions of Liege, including Frahan in the most remote corner of his diocese. He made his way back to the little village where three years before he himself had installed, from all reports, a very successful *mediatrix*. Abbot Martin testified that the villagers called upon Christiana van Frahan in droves, for her pragmatic advice and her benevolent humors. She'd produced seven books for him in the intervening time, generating quite a nice sum of money for the bishop's private coffers as well as contracts for future work. They'd exchanged letters with each manuscript, and he was always impressed with her ideas and intellect. Currently, she was transcribing a book of saints' days for the son of Guy of Dampierre, the Count of Flanders and Bishop Hugues' dear friend, to give to his wife Philipotte of Milly on their rapidly approaching wedding day. Hugues hoped she would have a manuscript for him to take back to his inn.

When he arrived, it pleased him to see the little hamlet of Frahan had grown and prospered, as the anchorhold became a popular destination for those seeking her wisdom at the window. Most cottages were newly-thatched and the foot bridge had been reinforced. Beau Sejour had added more rooms to let, and the market area was now enclosed by a low fence. The walkway to Christiana's quarters was lined with slate, a

hedge had been planted alongside as a wall to keep the anchoress secluded from the benches which had been installed for visitors waiting to meet her. He was amused when he saw the little bell and string, which he pulled to alert the lady of his approach. He needn't have bothered. She had seen him coming up the rise in the road from her hidden perch above the anchorhold.

The bishop and the anchoress talked like old friends for quite a long time. She told him of her early challenges counseling the villagers, and he told her of his struggles beginning his religious life as a hermit in the woods outside of Bouillon. Christiana was stunned and moved by his revelation. It was as if his time as a solitary had lain table to their solidarity, and finally, she understood why she had felt connected to and comforted by him when she'd been so afraid of all other men. The conversation abraded her doubts, about herself and the world, the way her knife scraped away mistakes she made on the vellum while she copied text for him. That night, the prelate lodged at Beau Sejour while Christi worked late to finish the Book of Days. She traded the completed but unbound quires for the brambants Bishop Hugues brought her the next morning. He added colorful new ink pots to her collection and promised to send her new assignment soon.

After they'd said their goodbyes, Christi pulled close her curtain, climbed the mason's covert stone ladder, pushed the tiny hatch open, and clambered onto the roof of the anchorhold. Hidden behind its peak and the ridge of Sint Sebastian's, she watched him go. After the baby was born and she'd had the urge to go outside, this spot was a sanctuary that had preserved her sanity. She'd gratefully watched the clouds and birds overhead, appreciated once again the sun on her face, and snuck glimpses of life on the

road to the west of the church. Now, she spent some time most days praying from her open-air roost. She was in closer proximity to God there anyway, she reasoned.

As the sun set, Christi contemplated what she might do with her time while she was waiting for the arrival of the bishop's next book. She decided to continue her own journal. So much had happened in her life since she'd run out of room on the page with her drawing of Pepper curled in the corner. Before long, her anger at her father, the rape, the feigned petition for enclosure, and the baby's birth all found their way onto spare parchment. Like chopped masterwort in warm wine reduces fever, writing about the events brought catharsis for her shame and fear. The imprisoned monsters, once released from the locked trunk in her mind, became instead ugly pets, still unappealing but much less frightful. Her anxieties vanished, and she felt a need to break off a hunk of the world and bring it into the anchorhold with her.

Several weeks after the bishop's visit, an opportunity presented itself as a group of children ran through the cemetery, playing hoodman's blind. When the game inevitably degenerated with shouts of "You peeked!" several of them cast curious glances toward Christiana's window and took turns shoving each other closer to the cell. Christi recognized a Baker face on one of the youngest and called out, "Daughter of Berte Baker, come to visit your anchoress" as brightly as she could. The other children scattered at her voice, but the little girl trooped gamely to the window. "What's your name, young lady?"

"I'm called Piper." Christi could hear why, with that voice as high pitched as a fipple flute.

"I'm called Christiana."

“I know,” Piper replied. “Uncle Eiki talks about you all the time.”

“Do you know your letters?”

“Le...Wha’?”

“Has anyone ever taught you to read?”

“No?” Piper said, with equal parts suspicion and curiosity.

“Well, we must remedy that.” She went to the desk and hastily penned a large A in black ink on a piece of parchment.

When she turned around, the little girl had stuck her head and shoulders most of the way through the window and was inspecting Christiana’s room. She shooed Piper back onto the seat outside and taught her the first letter of the alphabet, talking about apples and arms and axes. “Like the one Fa uses when he cuts wood for the ovens,” Piper declared proudly.

“Yes, Piper. That’s exactly right. If you come to my window after Mass, I’ll teach you the next letter of our alphabet.”

“What is it? What is it!” she demanded, bouncing up and down on the bench.

“I’ll tell you when you return after Father Villenc’s services on Sunday.” Piper pushed out her bottom lip, but the well-practiced pout turned abruptly into a grand smile. Christiana could imagine what she was thinking: she’d have something to flaunt to the other children who’d been too timid to talk to the anchoress. And that’s how Frahan’s Sunday school began.

Chapter 31

“We know how you love to right a good runt.” Elsa leaned forward and smiled broadly, awaiting Christi’s reaction, as Piet handed the smallest from his litter of collies through the window. The black and white pup wiggled and wagged, circling Christiana’s ankles protectively, instinctively. Then, he climbed up into her lap. Already whelped, he sensed he’d found his mistress and began to lick her face with passionate appreciation. She’d forgotten how good it felt to giggle. “Piet wasn’t going to be able to sell him, and we couldn’t just drown him.”

“So, Merry Christmas!” Piet said, always happy to please the anchoress. “What’ll you call him?”

Christi wiped her cheek with her sleeve and scratched her new companion’s back. “I’ll call him Talbot.” The puppy rolled to show his pink underbelly in a happy response to his new name.

Talbot remained small enough to fit through the gap in the stones, and Christi quickly had him trained to leap up and through the window when he had business to do outside. But always, he’d leap back in, preferring his lady’s lap to any other activity but eating. He ate whatever was served him—a stewed marten head, a gift bone from the butcher’s wife after his mistress had given good counsel, a piece of fish, skin and all. His favorite was a boiled egg, and he’d do tricks for it, which charmed the children who came to learn their letters. When Christiana taught the letter T, Talbot proudly sat in the small circle outside the anchorhold, letting himself be pet in turn by each of Piper’s friends.

Chapter 32

The orphan at his duties vacillated between adolescent indignance and abject piety. Thomas was at the abbot's side as he painstakingly espaliered the pear tree on the south-facing wall of the monastery's gardens. Today, Thomas's role was gathering the stray clippings—leaves and branches—that fell unheeded during Father Abbot Martin's work. He often felt like the discarded flora, until the old man deigned to pat his head and say gently, "Such a good boy" as if he were talking to Someone else and not to Thomas himself.

As a little boy, Thomas had alternately wanted to please the old abbot and kick him in the shin and run out the tall planked gates of the monastery and become important somehow. But where would he go? The story was that he'd been deposited on the steps of Rochehaut Abbey as an infant, where they suckled him on a rag dipped in goats' milk until he was old enough to eat the porridge Brother Joos prepared in the kitchen. In the first decade of his life, he'd found it wise to ingratiate himself to the monks, fearing a repetition of the earlier abandonment—and hating himself for that fear and resulting insinuation. The brothers taught him to read and write, to reason and pray, and he should have been grateful. But they never taught him to forgive, and he was never able to forgive them for it.

Because the men around him were largely silent, Thomas had much time to weigh his life. Although he knew he was expected to contemplate God, he found himself more often contemplating his other options. Really, none existed, as far as he could imagine, and this realization was the impetus for his daily mental self-flagellation, which often

manifested in his chasing the chickens until they squawked or swatting a stray dog begging for scraps. Like a smith banging iron into a sword, each new day Thomas's thoughts created an arsenal with no real enemy but himself. Though he prayed about it, the boy could not smother his anger. His one-sided conversations with God never yielded an answer. Thomas wished he had someone else to talk to about the maddening wrath within him.

When Abbot Martin died in 1312 and the monks passed over Evrard in favor of appointing old Brother Gerard the new abbot, for a time, Thomas was drawn to Evrard's barely-contained fury. The brother and the postulant worked together in the garden, digging, weeding, training the trees, and smoking the bees. The tedious jobs served only to afford Thomas more time for his dangerous deliberations. They had the opposite effect on Evrard, whose ire soon faded as he forgave the other monks their choice, leaving Thomas alone again in his inexplicable rage. Abbot Gerard recognized Thomas's true nature, and assigned him the tasks that required heavy lifting, in an attempt to erode his negativity and balance his humors.

One such task was to help the aging Brother Bernart travel up and down the hill to Frahan, where the pretty maids ignored Thomas and the dogs growled as he passed. This village felt, to Thomas, as if it were at the eastern edge of the world. There, he and Bernart traded the abbey's meadowsweet mead for coins, and loaned their books in exchange for prayers from the *mediatrix*, whose smile and joy seemed to contradict all the holiness and stoicism he had been expecting. He could neither abide nor pardon the God in her happiness—was, instead, jealous of it. Sometimes, when Thomas visited Frahan, he would stop and talk to the frowning Father Villenc in the rectory. They would

share a jug of ale and discuss matters while Bernart hunted truffles in the fertile dirt of the forest just beyond the churchyard. Villenc was a fine man who agreed with Thomas's assessment of the anchoress. Their conversations always circled back to her lack of piety.

"I hear her chin wagging all day long. Most of the parishioners trust her more than they do me, which is a travesty," Villenc said during one visit just after Rochehaut Abbey accepted Thomas as a novice. The priest had forgotten that her works removed from his shoulders the burden of counsel.

"She's in there laughing with her servant from sunup to sundown and teaching children to read on Sundays," he added the next time they met, a week before Abbot Gerard died. Villenc's words were the anvil over which Thomas hammered his anger, forging it into a tool rather than a weapon against himself.

"My flock thinks she's a mystic, and now she has a *dog* living in the anchorhold with her!" he hissed while they chewed the fat after laying the village baker to rest in the graveyard. Thomas was in a particularly foul mood, for St. Honore's bread was the only thing he liked about Frahan, and he doubted the baker's sons could reproduce the dead man's recipe. "I have a mind to write the bishop." Thomas encouraged him to do so, wishing impertinently for the anchoress's downfall with startling ferocity. Villenc knew what Thomas did not—that Bishop Hugues had a soft place in his heart for the popular anchorite. Until the bishop was gone, Sint Sebastian's priest would have little to gain from publicly damning Christiana. Even then, he'd have to tread lightly because she enjoyed the villagers' loyalty. Instead, Villenc glowered in his impotence.

Gerard's death unsettled the monks, and Thomas wasn't yet bold enough to disparage the recluse to his new abbot, Evrard. He knew, like everyone else, that she was

Evrard's sister, estranged as they were. He hugged his grievance until one afternoon, unexpectedly, he read something that could help him contrive against her. In the abbey library the afternoon after professing his temporary vows, he happened upon a book entitled *The Guide for Anchoresses*. Ignoring his other duties, he read the small text from cover to cover between nones and vespers, admiring its beautifully-wrought calligraphy and riveted by its assertive rules. A plan formed against her while the brothers prayed. Alas, anger's offspring is sin cloaked in good deeds.

Chapter 33

The writing in the new book was smaller than she'd ever transcribed, and Christiana spent much of her time moving her head near the page and then pulling back from it, opening her lids wide to make the letters clear enough to copy. Her eyes were tired these days, from years of scribing in near-darkness, she supposed. Even squinting and with several thick candles lit, Christiana strained to discern anything but the illuminations at the beginning of each new passage in this Bible.

Villenc came to her window one cool autumn afternoon when she'd just finished penning Hebrews 7:12. Usually, a scowl dominated his face and Christiana could deduce his mood, but today he seemed uncharacteristically blithe. She glanced over at the dog curled up on her pallet and prayed he wouldn't wake up at the sound of the priest's voice.

"I've disheartening news, Sister," Father Villenc said, but his lilting voice leaked something like delight. "Our beloved Bishop Hugues is dead." Christi put a hand to her mouth. "Antone de Lul succeeds him in the administration of the bishopric." *Oily Bishop*

Antone, thought Christiana, shaking her head at the sadness that engulfed her. “I’m sure he will oversee many needed changes in Liege.” Villenc made a show of scanning her quarters through the stone gap between them. Was he suppressing a smile? When he’d returned to the rectory, Christi stared numbly at the words she’d been copying before his appearance: “For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.”

More bad news arrived the next afternoon. Eiki reported Madam Tanner had succumbed to a fever and would be buried in the churchyard beside her husband and daughter after Mass on the morrow. With two of her dearest champions gone in two days, Christi felt her world spinning uncontrollably. She and Eiki talked for a long time, and it was his holding of her hands that got the whirling thoughts under control. By the time the Tanner ceremony was through, Frahan’s anchoress had compartmentalized her own sorrow and was again solid enough to offer the villagers her best counsel.

The first she heard from Bishop Antone was about a month later just before All Saints’ Day, as Piet cleared the blowing ash leaves from the anchorage walkway. Brother Bernart delivered Antone’s brief missive asking after the Bible, commending her work as an attribute of God, and alerting her to another manuscript’s impending arrival—a Gospel Book commissioned by a wealthy Walloon. He insisted it needed copying by Christmas.

Although the colder weather kept some of the parishioners from her window, Christiana asked Piet to erect the sign again barring visitors so that she could concentrate on finishing the Bible for the insistent bishop. He obliged, and Christiana spent most of November rubbing her eyes and scratching out the New Testament hastily, its illuminations wan in comparison to her former work. Even worse, Christi gave the

Gospel Book into the hands of a messenger three days before Christmas, like a heedless midwife delivering an unwanted bastard child.

Knowing her close sight would be a hindrance going forward, she penned an apology to Bishop Antone and convinced Elsa that they should learn to knit in order to have something to sell at the market. Because of Piet, they had ample amounts of wool, and Christi gave Elsa some of her coins to purchase a spinning wheel and distaff to turn that wool into skeins.

Without looking Christiana square in the eye, Elsa said, “I’m going to keep the spinning at Piet’s. The light’s better there, and there’s more space, too. And I won’t have to cart the wool back and forth.”

“That’s reasonable,” she replied. But the anchoress suspected the move was an excuse to pass more time at the groundskeeper’s cottage. It occurred to her, at long last, that Piet’s beloved was the orphan who slept only feet from her own bed. And Elsa’s devotion to Christi precluded a normal life with the man she favored. Although theirs had been a mutual arrangement, the anchoress had never planned on being a burden to her friend. Heavy spiders crawled around in her guts every time she thought of herself as an onus to Elsa.

Often without human companionship that January, Christiana sat protected from the wind on the anchorhold roof, looking off toward the bakery and interlacing long stretches of yarn as the winter sun warmed her shoulders. Only when Talbot whined did she climb down and snuggle with him on the pallet, covering them both with her threadbare comforter.

Under no vow of poverty, Antone had romanticized the day when he'd construct a palace with the windfall from Frahan. Fortune frowned on the anchoress on New Year's Day when three letters arrived at the bishop's partially-completed inn on the banks of the Semois in Bouillon. The benefactor from Wallonia was unhappy with the manuscript, paying only half the agreed-upon price, which sent the new bishop into a rage. Then Father Villenc's scripted correspondence cited Christiana's unbecoming behavior, quoting long portions of the Guide for Anchoresses which Antone had never read but nonetheless seized upon in his anger over her shoddy labor. Regrettably, Christiana's letter was at the bottom of the bishop's pile that day, so her kind words congratulating him on his appointment and her apologies about her poor eyesight and hurried work went unheeded. Like a spoiled child, Bishop Antone hurled his papers to the floor. The hounds dropped their ears and tails and scattered at the sound of his oaths.

Thomas carried the guidebook around under his arm wherever he went, preaching propriety. He practiced his arguments first on Brother Bernart.

"The anchorhold curtain should be drawn at all times, don't you think? It says so right here in the rulebook." The old traveler did not respond, but whether his reticence derived from deafness or dissent, Thomas couldn't tell.

"An anchoress should never touch a man. She's always holding the parishioners' hands when she prays with them. It says right here, 'I implore you anchoresses, hold your hands within your windows. Any touch between a man and an anchoress is a thing so ugly and a deed so shameful and so naked a sin, it is to all the world hateful and scandalous.' She must be made to follow the rules," he said to a small audience at Beau Sejour. All were noncommittal, tactfully nodding without conviction.

But one in the corner introduced himself as Ghoris and bade Brother Thomas to continue. “Wha’ elsh does tha’ boog say?” he asked. Thomas, pleased to have an interested audience, joined him on the bench and read aloud the pertinent passages, the ones with which he intended to start his campaign.

Ghoris remembered the conversation with the physically lumbering but verbally eloquent monk, Brother Something or Other, and when his ale head wore off the next afternoon, he took up the crusade in his own house. He was, quite unpredictably, met with stringent resistance from his wife Lelien. The neighbors chattered that night about a forceful row they’d heard coming from the roofer’s cottage, which ended with crockery hitting walls and Lelien stomping down the lane toward the church before supper.

Father Villenc’s brows dipped when he saw the dark curtain drawn across Christiana’s window. He rang the bell, and she answered, “I beg, come pray with me, visitor,” without moving the cloth to the side as she normally would. She explained, “I’ve lately revisited a guidebook for anchoresses. It suggests that I keep my curtain drawn while giving counsel. Please forgive the change.”

“Christiana, it is Father Villenc.” His voice was a rash in need of itching.

Good, she thought. “Good morning, Father,” she said, waiting for what he’d proffer next. She was fairly certain she’d thwarted his first move in what she suspected would be a long chess match between them—if what Lelien had told her was correct. For the first time in a long while, Christi prayed for herself.

“I’m happy to hear you’ve been reviewing the text,” he said, wondering how she would have done that, what with Thomas exhausting the volume with sermons all over Frahan. Villenc wasn’t certain Thomas’s tactics followed the most effective course, but now that he was loosed on the village, like a rising river he was unstoppable. Villenc would ride the current. “You know then, surely, that the book suggests you keep your hands in the window at all times. Not, Sister, because you are suspect. Just to silence any critics.”

“Have there been many complaints, Father?” she asked, with feigned incredulity.

“Oh, no, no. It’s just...we want to...maintain the...purity of the anchorhold. You enjoy so many visitors from far and wide. Let’s keep in mind that their idle talk travels with them.” He liked this argument. “Keeping your curtain drawn and your hands within will show a great difference, anchoress, between you and a lady of the house.”

“Of course, Father.” When she didn’t hear his baleful breathing outside anymore, she knew he had gone. Christiana was surprised at her own speculation: How would she bear holding her hands back from Eiki?

Thomas lurked about the anchorhold each time he came into Frahan, waiting for a moved curtain or sleight of hand. None came. Instead of feeling placated, his ire doubled. He returned to his book and his proselytizing. One night in the tavern, Thomas hooked the shepherd Grote as he expounded, “She is too friendly with Elsa.” Grote nodded vigorously. “The guide says, ‘Do not break silence over food.’ And ‘The anchoress and her maid should not play worldly games at the window, nor should they tease one another. Every such fleshly comfort is a worthless thing for every spiritual person.’ Villenc intends to address this with her. Don’t you think, if she’s committed to praying

for your sins, she should be occupied with that and not playing chess? The *villagers* don't have time to play games." Thomas thought Grote's energetic head bobbing made him look like a convulsive pigeon, but the support emboldened him. With his argument mortared, he took his case to Villenc.

"Good morning, Christiana."

"Good morning, Father."

"I've come to discuss a complaint about your behavior."

"Oh?" Talbot crept over to Christi and put his head in her lap, sensing some strain in her spirit. She scratched behind his ears absentmindedly as he stared up at her with his benevolent eyes.

"In truth, it is I who have the complaint. Sister, I often hear you through the squint as I prepare Mass. Elsa's laughter can be heard during your meals, and I suspect the chink of game pieces some afternoons. Do you agree?"

"Yes, Father." Damn him. He was getting Elsa involved now in their feud. She padded silently to the little door and rapped with one finger, shushing Elsa when she opened it. "I do pass the time with my servant, who helps me keep sane so that I may be whole enough to offer advice and guidance to your flock."

Elsa and Christiana listened together as Villenc finished, "Well, I expect these bad exchanges and game playing to end." Elsa, her lips pursed as tightly as a walnut shell, began to shove the boards and pieces through the doorway into the anchorhold as he spoke. "Tell Elsa that when she goes about, she should keep her head covered and her eyes downcast. She should not embrace in friendship nor carry about idle stories or news.

So says the guide for anchoresses. We don't want any wicked reputation to develop about your piety, Christiana."

"Of course, Father." When he'd gone, she stuffed the kirtle into the squint and turned to Elsa. They whispered together worriedly. The persecution was worsening. They wondered what they might do when it became unbearable.

"Villenc needs to be reminded how much he despised counseling people when Hildegarde was gone," Elsa said.

So Nine Men's Morris and chess were stacked, useless under the writing table, and Christi developed a harsh cough. Piet put up the sign barring access to the anchorhold window and removed the bell's string. Many villagers worried and prayed about the health of their anchoress. Mattheus and Piet and Lelien and Colin and Eiki and Berte Baker all went to Father Villenc for guidance while Christi convalesced. A week later, the priest spoke to Christiana through the squint, inquiring about her health and reminding her that an anchoress was really only supposed to keep a cat, according to the rules prescribed in the guide. Suddenly, Christi's cough abated, and Piet took down the sign and reattached the bell. Villenc and Christi were, for the moment, it seemed, at a stalemate.

Disregarding all the kindnesses the anchoress had done for the citizens of Frahan, Thomas, who hadn't been privy to any of these developments at Sint Sebastian's, was hellbent on battle. He asked Abbot Evrard if he might take leave from Rochehaut Abbey and travel as a friar to Frahan to spread spirituality there. Frankly, he was astonished when Evrard agreed.

“Perhaps the anchoress needs a gentle nudge in the direction of virtue,” he’d said to Thomas before granting permission and long crosses for his lodging.

On the village’s main thoroughfare as the sun pulled behind the west hills, Thomas’s talk about the anchoress and her dog drew the butcher like iron to lodestone. “Every time my mother or wife visits the anchorhold, they take a bone to feed that cur,” the butcher complained. “Coins right out of my pocket.” He spit into the dirt on the road as they headed toward Beau Sejour.

“The rule for anchoresses is that they may keep a cat only, and that for mousing not comfort. No other livestock or animals.” Thomas ordered two braggots of ale and let the butcher pay. “She must spend inordinate time feeding and training and grooming and petting that dog, while the parishioners would have her praying for their souls.” He stoked the man’s ire with quotes from the guidebook as they shared a loaf of the warm bread just delivered from the bakery by the young man with the long face. During their conversation, the butcher admitted his choler, too, not only about the bones but because his eight-year-old son would rather learn his letters from her than the family trade from him.

“He’s a argr, ’s’wha’ he is,” the butcher carped, forgetting the anchoress for a moment in his familial angst.

“Well, the guide says...” Thomas flipped through and found the relevant passage. ““An anchoress should not presume to teach even children,”” which brought the man back to the friar’s side of the conversation. “Her perfidy cannot go unpunished.” Over another mug of ale, they plotted.

Eiki hustled up the road from Beau Sejour to the anchorhold at dusk.

“Christi!” he called in an exaggerated whisper.

Talbot’s snout poked out with tongue extended, nudging the cloth so he could get a good look at his favorite visitor. The baker could hear a tail swishing back and forth in celebration of his arrival.

“What is it, Eiki?” she asked, forcing the dog gently away from the window. He pulled the curtain open so he could look at her, heedless of the insufferable new rules that had been imposed.

“Christi, I—” he began, stopping her hand as she tried to draw the curtain. He began again. “Christi. I have two bits of news for you.” His blue eyes looked into hers in that penetrating Baker way. “Maybe they’re bad.” He tried to decide which piece of information to share first.

“Maybe they’re not. Out with them, Eiki,” she said impishly, trying to lighten the mood. She was unsuccessful. Changing tactics, she put her pointer to her lips and hooked her thumb back over her shoulder toward the squint. She never knew when Villenc was listening, and she’d curtailed her conversations accordingly.

Eiki nodded, dropping his voice. “I was just at the inn. I heard that clodpole Friar Thomas and Willem...”

“The butcher?”

“Yes. I—”

“I just spoke with his wife today.” They’d prayed about her son’s effeminate qualities, prayed for Willem to stop calling him an argr to his face. Christiana hadn’t been able to give much advice about it but had told the mother that her boy was delightful

when he came to her window to read. “She even brought Talbot a bone,” she said, not heeding Eiki’s urgency. At the mention of his name and the word “bone,” Talbot thumped his tale and jumped playfully at the smelly treat on the floor.

“Christi. I heard them talking about how an anchoress should only have a cat, not any other animal. Not a dog. They seemed to be conspiring to take Talbot.”

“What?” *Villenc and I have declared a truce on this point*, she thought. All the other moves he’d made were almost bearable. Taking Talbot from her would be checkmate. But this might not be his move. Could Brother Thomas be playing his own game? Why was Evrard letting one of his monks out of the abbey to harass her? Her guts grumbled. Surely, Thomas would have to have asked her brother’s permission to pursue this course of action. Christi remembered Thomas lurking around the hedges while she sat with different parishioners. What had she ever done to him?

“There’s something else.” Christi’s guts roiled. She’d forgotten there was more news. “My uncle in Rochefort is ailing. Christi, everyone says I should go help him with the bakery there. That it’s where my future lies. You know he has no children, that he is lonely since my aunt died, that I liked the city of Rochefort when I visited as a boy.”

Christiana nodded. “But, Christi, I don’t want to leave you. I—I love you.” He hung his head in shame. Christiana was an angel, an anchoress, and was not to be mortally loved as he loved her. She reached through the window and lifted his chin with her fingertips, compelling him to meet her gaze.

“Don’t feel bad about loving, Eiki,” she said fiercely. “It is the most important lesson we learn from Jesus.”

Just then, they heard voices carrying up the road. Christi looped a short piece of rope around Talbot's neck. "Take him, Eiki. Take him to the bakery and then pack for Rochefort. Talbot'll keep you company on the road. Do you trust me?" He looked at her suppliantly, not wanting to leave her this way. "Trust me, Eiki. Don't wait here. But wait when you get to Rochefort, regardless of what you hear from Frahan." She watched them disappear into the darkness of the graveyard before pulling her curtain shut.

Only a few moments later, a deep voice addressed her from outside the anchorhold. It was a voice she hadn't heard since before her father left. Willem, the butcher, was calling for her and for her dog drunkenly, using words like "improper" and "shameful" and "reputation." She heard two other male voices, one of which seemed to be feeding these words to Willem.

Fearless of these men, and proud of her hard-earned fearlessness, she capped the impudence that threatened to creep into her voice with a piety she'd been practicing for ages. "Come pray with me, sir. Forgive my drawn curtain. It does not mean to insult you with its aloofness, but is closed for modesty's sake."

"We come for the dog, Sister." This was Thomas's voice, she was sure.

"By Saint Hubert, there is no dog in the anchorhold, Brother," she answered. "The beast ran away after a rabbit two days ago, and I've not seen it since."

There were oaths muttered and then the drunken voice again. "You're not to be believed."

"If I could draw the curtain, I would show you for sooth." Her anger made her bold, and she moved her next pawn. "I may only pull the cloth with my confessor's

permission. If you want to inspect the anchorhold, you'll have to appeal to Father Villenc."

The noise had drawn Elsa out of Piet's cottage. Christiana watched by the light of the moon as her servant noiselessly moved from one shadow to the next, creeping the thirty or so paces up the slope from the river to make it appear as if she were coming from the village on some errand. Elsa's head was covered with a whimple and her eyes were downcast as she approached. Her meek voice cut through the tension that had been building outside the anchorhold window.

"What for, gentlemen?" Elsa asked demurely.

"We...we want Father Villenc."

"Well, then you are on the wrong side of the building," Elsa replied, as if these men were unfamiliar to the parish. Christiana narrowly missed strangling a guffaw. When no one said anything for a long moment, Elsa added, "Would you like me to fetch him for you at this late hour?"

"Mm-hm." Then all was quiet without.

She soon heard Villenc's voice, and it seemed the men summarized their predicament. She managed to perceive a few phrases. "The abbot...permission to...purity of the anchorhouse."

"I can assure the truth of her statement," Villenc said loudly so that she could hear. "The dog is gone and will not return under my watch." Thus the tiny mob was disbursed back to the village. Villenc walked them to the road and watched them stumble toward the inn. Then he moved all the way around the church before approaching the

window. The night had gotten very cold. “Christiana, light a taper and unhang the curtain.” The anchoress held her tongue at the hypocrisy and did as he bade.

After scanning the anchorhold and finding Talbot absent, Villenc looked at her blankly. Finally, he said, “If that dog comes back, I’ll have Willem put an arrow through its chest.” *Well-played, priest*, she thought, her blood boiling like a cauldron of porrey. He went from her window to Elsa’s room to inspect. He found nothing improper. All personal possessions had already been moved to Piet’s sheep shed.

On the morrow, market day, Christiana and Elsa whispered at the little door between their quarters. “For the first time, I feel incarcerated here, Elsa,” Christi lamented, after relaying Eiki’s news. “I’ve done a fine job as an anchoress, even if it started out as artifice, haven’t I?”

“You have, Christi. But now it’s my turn to unload a burden.” Christiana watched Elsa twist her hands together as many women had done over the years before unburdening themselves. But it had never been Elsa, her coconspirator. Christi tilted her head the way Talbot always did when he thought he heard something new. God’s thumbs, she missed the dog already. “I’m pregnant.” Christi leaned her forehead against the wall between them and reached out to take her friend’s hands in her own.

Although she could no longer see clearly items near to her, her mind’s eye was as fertile as ever and the pressure of Elsa’s pregnancy planted a seed in Christiana’s mind. A ruse had reinvented her once in self-defense, and she had gone on to thrive. By breathing optimism into her village and inhaling the perfume of its graces, she was stronger now,

less afraid of the outside world. Mightn't she reconceive her fate again? She had been somebody in Frahan and now she could be anybody somewhere else.

Because she'd taken no vows, her purported failure as an anchoress might not damn her, but her failure to reimagine her future might be fatal, if Father Villenc and Brother Thomas had their way. And as much as it grieved her to admit it, Evrard was ineffective in helping her just as he'd been when they were younger, leaving her in their father's unpleasant, incapable hands to pursue his own destiny. It did not make her bitter. He had, after all, kept her secret these long years. She decided to forgive him and forget him. Everything she hadn't known she wanted was on the other side of her fear of the clergy. She prepared again to craft her own story.

At midday next, she instructed Elsa to head to the market to purchase some wares, handing over several of Madam Tanner's long crosses. Elsa laughed at the list: a leather flask, beeswax, several thin iron skewers, a bronze knife, a scrip, carmine powder, three land-yards of brown wool cloth, a wide-brimmed hat, and the largest cantaloup she could find. She didn't bother to ask for the reasons. She trusted her mistress's wily mind. Perhaps the less she knew, the better. "I'm going to have to borrow Piet's barrow to haul everything."

"Grab his shears while you're there. Oh, and get us two meat pies if one of the stalls has them!" Christi shouted as the annex door swung shut. When Elsa returned later, laden with the merchandise, they sat down at the hidey-door to share a large pork pie with raisins. They dug into it with two copper spoons. Christi predicted her cough would return. Elsa agreed.

Each day the next week, Christi's hacking got worse, her hue became more pallid, and then finally the sign was up banning visitors again. Elsa returned to the market, this time for a heap of root vegetables. Elsa reported, "Everyone in Frahan knows you're ill. Some're arguing that you're afflicted because your heart's brother left for a new life to the north. Others say it's because of the rules Villenc and Thomas have imposed on you, 'stifling your inner light' is how Lelien Deckere put it. Berte thinks it's because they wouldn't let you teach the children anymore. Colin said he'd heard that Villenc gave your dog to the traveling minstrels who came through Frahan last week. Oh, and the apothecary sent feverfew and nutmeg brewed in hot ale for your cough." She handed over a steaming mug and kept one for herself. "The whole time I was at the market today, I just kept my mouth shut and my head down. So says the guide for anchoresses."

They clinked their cups together and drank.

The cold weather persisted and a little snow fell almost every night, even though the calendar said it was spring. Returning from gathering eggs at the Tanners', Elsa heard some horrible news. Ghoris had been found that morning, frozen in a snow drift near the Deckere cottage. Seems he'd fallen and hit his head on their new stone fence on his usual walk back from the tavern the previous night.

"I'd always wished a white ulcer to develop under his tongue, but this is even better," Elsa said crudely. Christiana coughed.

Although the ground was softening enough to dig, they laid Ghoris Deckere to rest in one of Piet's unnerving, preemptive graves. Not many villagers attended the short service, but those who were present cast their eyes toward the anchorhold, saying more

prayers for Christiana than for the drunken Crusader who, during his life, thatched perhaps a dozen roofs and ruined about as many lives.

On the fifth consecutive day the anchoress hadn't appeared at the squint, Father Villenc walked around to her window and asked her to draw the curtain. He'd expected to see her obstinately hale despite the long-suffering cough. Instead, her ghostly pallor and dark under eye circles shocked him, and he began to worry genuinely about her health, not for her sake but for his. He'd heard all the rumors through the confessional. If she died, and it looked like she might, the villagers would never forgive him.

Villenc hadn't left Frahan in years. He decided now might be a good time to visit the bishop in Bouillon. He told Piet of his plans and hired a horse from the Tanners' stable.

The day after he trotted over the bridge, Christiana died.

Chapter 34

Elsa walked to the bakery to pick up the daily bread, which she'd been doing since Eiki had left for his uncle's. Despite the priest's restriction, Elsa told Berte and Jan that she hoped Christiana, who must be sleeping late because she hadn't responded to her knock, would awake healthy again. She admitted, though, that she was scared, and returned to the anchorhold with the loaves and butter.

Later, as the bells rang tierce, Elsa screamed loudly and ran to Piet, who ran to Mattheus. By the time Mattheus arrived with his mallet and chisel, a small crowd had gathered outside the hermitage. Mattheus slowly chipped away at the stone, and Elsa

wiggled through the hole as soon as it was big enough for her chubby body. The villagers heard her crying. With tears streaming down her face, Elsa confirmed for them that indeed their anchoress had expired. She asked Piet for a bucket filled with river water to cleanse the body and sent Berte into her quarters for a vial of holy water. For half an hour, Mattheus slowly worked on the opening. By the time Piet could step through it, Elsa had washed the body and wrapped it tightly in a shroud of white cloth. Meanwhile, all the villagers of Frahan had gathered behind the church. Mattheus kept chipping away. Piet, Elsa, and Mattheus lifted Christiana through the gap in the wall and carried her, laying her body gently beside one of the open graves. The villagers all stood blinking at one another in Villenc's absence until Piet decided he'd speak on their beloved Christiana's behalf.

Berte shook with sobs, but Piper kept her chin high as she held her mother's hand. The last time she'd visited, the angel, which is what Eiki had always called her, had said, "Little girl, shock everyone by being strong." Now, Christiana's words stirred Piper's insides like her mother's churn stirred cream into butter. Like butter, Piper was solid. The little girl let her tall spine announced her strength to everyone, including the pilgrim who observed the ceremony from the other side of the shallow Semois. As Piet shoveled Frahan's dirt onto the body of the anchoress, the pilgrim tipped his hat at Piper and turned away.

Chapter 35

Thomas trudged down into Frahan, his feet turning to ice blocks, heavier with each step. White vapors channeled out from between his lips as he ascending the road past the mill. He heard the squeal of a pig being butchered. Two of the parishioners stopped, grain sacks hung over their shoulders like carcasses, to stare with stony faces as he passed. He caught the tail of a conversation shouted between the Deckere boys as they thatched the inn's roof. Their mother had found an unexpected jar of coins on their doorstep after their father's untimely death. Thomas missed the rest of it as the March wind whipped their voices away. St. Honore tempted him because the Baker boys had retained the delectable recipe from their father after all. But, as he got closer, the two-story crucked-timber structure was as buttoned up as the pope's cassock.

Thomas climbed through the small opening in the hermitage wall the mason must have cut for the fat servant and the suspiciously smiling groundskeeper to remove the body. The air in this tomb, rather than being musty as he'd expected, held the odor of beeswax, clean river water, and perhaps root vegetables. Brown and white feathers, which lay everywhere in the room like a fine dusting of snow, skittered at his movements and spun into the corners. He wondered at them. Christ on his crucifix stared down reproachfully. Thomas already felt the walls closing in around him, and he shivered, not from cold, but awe. A woman had lived within this cell for so many years. How had she born the solitude? For a moment, the callousness of his vendetta pricked him.

Thomas thumbed absently through a pile of unbound quires within a worn psalter. His first thought was that it must be her final, incomplete text, one that had been

abandoned to poor eyesight, which ultimately, he knew, had pushed Bishop Antone to side with Father Villenc, himself, and a handful of watchful men in the parish. They hadn't meant to harry her to the point of infirmity, but women's constitutions were known to be weak.

Thomas, at the ripe age of sixteen, had finally learned to forgive. In fact, he had easily forgiven himself for her death. But Abbot Evrard hadn't, and as punishment assigned Thomas as her hagiographer. How would he produce adulatory writing about a woman he knew had been no saint? He would have to learn everything he could about the anchoress and be creative in idealizing his subject.

On closer examination of the pages he'd been handling, French vernacular, instead of the expected Latin, captured the monk's curiosity, and he pulled the scuffed, three-legged stool up to the window to read, spreading the psalter on his lap. For a moment, he pondered why the book still sat in the anchorhold, why Villenc or one of the villagers hadn't taken it from its place on the desk before now. It was eerie, as if Someone had wanted him to find it. He guessed that the servant was still keeping watch over the rooms. He could find the maid and interview her later.

Thomas located what seemed to be the first page, with a cat curled in the upper left corner. He marveled at the artist's precise rendering. Now, he read: *Christiana, the anchoress at Sint Sebastian's hermitage, was born in the village of Frahan, Liege, in the spring of the year of Our Lord 1286 to Arend and Mary. Her brother Evrard, four years older, loved to play priest. It was from him that Christiana first learned the calming effect of prayer and the freedom of the written word.*

Turning to the next page, he continued reading, about her first fumbling attempts at the window, of the birth of a litter of three kittens, and of her favorite parishioners. A blue wave illumed the letter A in the story of Amee, a generous pilgrim who had gone to the sea in Spain and found great pleasure in the traveling life. And then, in a shaky entry marked by the date September 1300, she wrote about her anguish in hiding a dire secret. Reading the record of her pain in childbirth should have angered Thomas and reignited his fiery lectures but he started to know the rest of the story before he read it, and a warning heat traveled up his spine. The ambivalence for the baby afterward and her agonizing decision to send him off to the monastery with Elsa were recorded earnestly and with a trembling hand. He didn't have to figure the math. He squinted at the page as tears clouded his vision and dropped onto the parchment, smearing the ink. Life pressed his head down darkly onto the psalter. Christiana was his mother. And he had killed her.

Epilogue

The pilgrim closed her eyes, felt the heft of coins sewn into the hem of her cape, and smiled at her triumph. Another secret was safe. She removed her wide-brimmed hat and watched French peasants sowing peas and barley in the fields. She felt reborn, as if she'd yet to be initiated by life's sadism, and knew it was right to be returning to the unrestricted expanse of the world. Adjusting the scallop shell badge on the front of her cloak and tucking her sweaty, cropped hair behind her ears, the pilgrim resumed her travels.

First, she would to Santiago de Compostela in Spain to atone for her many transgressions as the anchoress in Frahan had instructed her to do. For safety, she'd use her modest smile, reverence, and charitable nature to fall in with a larger band of pilgrims seeking to expiate their own offenses. Once there, she'd listen to the pounding sea and release her sins into the receding tide. With any luck, she'd be to the coast before the summer droughts. Then she would walk north to a small city where she could water flowerboxes, listen to music floating down cobblestone streets, scratch a dog behind its ears, and drink in the sun. She would to Rochefort to meet a Baker.

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